Rewrite the History of a Chinese-American Female: Narratology of *The Lost Daughter of Happiness (Fusang)*

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Abstract:

Chinese American writer Yan Geling depicts the life of a Chinese prostitute in the US society one hundred years ago in her novel *The Lost Daughter of Happiness (Fusang)*. By analyzing the narratology of the novel, this essay discusses the issues of male gaze as well as Orientalism in the perspective of postcolonial feminism. The resistance against the dominating male-Western narration in US history prevails between the lines. In the first chapter of her work, Yan evokes readers' identification with her heroine in their cognitive experience by adopting the tactics of second-person narrative, which puts the reader at the site of an objectified Asian female. The trick turns the table on readers. Being different from the readers of American history books that record Chinese prostitutes, the readers of Yan's novel are no longer the subjects of giving judgement. Instead, they are forced into a shocking illusion of being judged with nude body by an authority. And with the superimposed points of view, Yan intentionally keeps the superimposed underpainting of male gaze and Orientalism, and re-superimposes a new perspective to fight against those stereotypes of Asian females. The combination of first and second-person in *Fusang* creates a mutual gazing space by constructing an opposition between "you" and "I". This opposition serves as the prerequisite for the inversion of their subject-object relation and the communication between them, and finally "you" and "I" manage to communicate in the visual space. In these ways, Yan rewrites the cultural history of Asian-American females by substituting "history" with"herstory".

Keywords: *The Lost Daughter of Happiness*, postcolonial feminism, second-person narrative, superimposed points of view

Introduction

Fusang (also called *The Lost Daughter of Happiness*) is a novel written by Chinese-American writer Yan Geling. In this novel, she depicts the life of a Chinese prostitute in US society one hundred years ago, whose name is *Fusang.* By analyzing the narratology of *Fusang,* this paper discusses the issues of the male gaze, as well as Orientalism from the perspective of postcolonial feminism.

The extensive adoption of the second-person narration is one of the most prominent narrative features of *Fusang*, which is rarely found in common novels dominated by first-person and third-person narrators. Even in the modern age, where narrative techniques are constantly innovating, the novels with second-person narratives are still on the fringes of the mainstream. However, Yan Geling brought visual features into her text with the second-person narration. She implied the visuality of second-person narration in *Fusang* in an interview. She said there was a vibe when she adopted the second-person narrator "you" during the writing of *Fusang*, yet this vibe faded away as soon as she shifted to the third-person narration. In explanation for her failure in third-person narration for *Fusang*, she said."I failed to create an image when writing... I could not write anything without an image in my mind's eye" (Liu and Yan, 2021, p. 88-95).

In fact, Yan Geling's reflections on her writing process suggest the unique visuality of the second-person narrative in *Fusang*. Through the second-person narrative of the first-person narrator, the author imparts pictoriality to the text. With the reader's misappropriation of the position of the narratee and the subsequent self-correction, readers are placed in the visual imagination of both the subject and object of the gaze, producing a fantastic superposition of psychological cognitive states. This double gaze with racial and gender bias is also based on the second-person narrative: through the use of the second-person "you", Yan Geling brings the multiple perspectives converged in the visual narrative layer into a common focus, making Fusang the visual center of the narrative. Subsequently, Yan Geling places the perspective with the value judgment of

the narrator "I" on top of the perspective of historians and characters, thus reshaping the image of the heroine and subverting the historical writing of Chinese women in the American patriarchal society. Yan Geling's rebellion is also reflected in the "mutual gazing space" that she creates through the combination of first – and second-person narratives. In the auditory narrative, the heroine Fusang is confined to a suppressed space of one-way discourse. Yet Fusang regains her intersubjectivity with the narrator "I" through the visual act of looking at each other in the visual narrative. In this way, the work resists the authoritarianism and renders intergenerational communication of Chinese immigrants in a equal way.

Methodology

Aiming to explore how the history of Chinese-American females is rewrite in *Fusang*, this paper adopts a method of close reading, researching the narratology of this novel. With the narratological and stylistic theories, this paper focuses on the second-person narratives in Yan Geling's novel *Fusang*. The narrative theories of Genette, Shen Dan, Zhao Yiheng and the stylistic theories of Geoffrey N. Leech and Michael H. Short provide the main theoretical basis for this research. The perspective of visual culture is also accommodated in this paper. The works of John Berger and Martin Jay provide the major theoretical resources for the visual analysis in this paper.

I. Readers' Reception and the Dual Gaze in Second-person Narration

Fusang is a vision-dominated text permeated with gazes towards the narratee. Gaze is a method of seeing that carries the operation of power or the entanglement of desire (Zhao et al. 2006, p. 349). The gaze in *Fusang* is manifested as the exhibition and

scrutinizing of heroine's body. The reader's mistake of taking the position of the narratee leads to the displacement of the gaze on the true narratee Fusang, and finally the gaze is dwelt upon the reader.

The gaze in *Fusang* is dual. It contains both male gaze and racial gaze, which is a dual objectification of the Chinese female Fusang by the American society dominated by male and Western centrism. First, Fusang's disadvantaged position as a woman in male society, especially her low status as a prostitute, further intensifies the objectification upon her, which is expressed in the male gaze she receives. John Berger points out that the gaze is embedded in gender consciousness, and that the female body is not an object at her own disposal: "The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object – and most particularly in an object of vision: a sight" (2010, p.47).

The opening of *Fusang* begins with the second-person narration, which is a unique expression compared to the third-person narration, making Fusang appear as an object to be viewed. Although the narrator "I" is a female, the description of Fusang is recreated from the historical records of white historians, so the description of Fusang is in the perspective of American patriarchal society, and the description of her body representations implies male desire and power: The author's brushstroke skims over her clothes, chin, face, and lips, writing: "Your body lying on a bamboo bed waiting to be enjoyed fills his mind" "Let me take a closer look at the flesh you use to entertain the world" (Yan, 2010, p. 16).

In the second-person narrative discourse, the narrator constantly uses words such as “show” and “reveal” to give instructions to Fusang's body, which shows that Fusang's body is "involuntarily" viewed by others and becomes a "public exhibit". Readers experience the feeling of Fusang's body being gazed at and openly exhibited with a series of second-person narrative discourses because of the illusion of replacing the presence of Fusang’s body with the reader’s own embodiment. In addition, the choice of narrative language presents a one-way, commanding discipline in the discourse: for example, "Raise your chin a little more," "There, that's

good." "Please don't move, just lie there." These are also manifestations of the gazer's condescending power over the gazee. Thus, the male gaze and discipline that is hidden when using third-person narration is fully exposed in the second-person discourse, from which the reader receives a shocking reading experience.

The gaze on the narratee not only comes from male desire, but also comes from the racial prejudgment from the white-dominated society. With the development of postcolonialism, more and more critics have pointed out that racial consciousness is also embedded in the gaze. Stuart Hall argues that in the racial gaze, black people are reduced to racial stereotypes, and in addition their bodies become fetish objects in the white field of vision, that is so-called the Spectacle of the Other (1997, p.287). This theory also applies to Chinese immigrants, who are also minorities in American society. The Orientalist perspective behind the gaze is illustrated by this passage in the text: "This gives me a clear view of your whole face. It doesn't matter, your too-short, too-wide face shape will only give an oriental mood. Every flaw of yours is a feature in the eyes of the curiosity seekers of your time" (Yan, 2010, p. 1) The second-person here is also a synonym for the Other, and under the gaze of Orientalism, it contains the colonial imagination of white mainstream society towards Chinese female. By mis-occupying the position of the "you" of the narratee, the reader is also exposed to the racial gaze.

In the first chapter of her work, Yan Geling evokes readers' identification with her heroine in their cognitive experience by adopting the tactics of second-person narrative, which puts the reader at the site of an objectified Asian female. The trick turns the table on readers. Being different from the readers of American history books that record Chinese prostitutes, the readers of Yan's novel are no longer the subjects of giving judgement. Instead, they are forced into a shocking illusion of being judged with nude body by an authority.

II. Second-person as the Focus of Superimposed Multiple Perspectives

In *Narrative Discourse*, Genette makes a clear distinction between the narrative voice and the narrative perspective, arguing that the “narrative voice” is the voice of the narrator and the "narrative perspective" refers to the point of view (1980, p 186). Shen Dan expands on Genette's concept of "narrative perspective", arguing that "A person's perspective is not only about his/her perception, but also about his/her particular view of things, standpoint or emotional attitude" (1980, p.191). The narrative of *Fusang* is characterized by the multiple perspectives. The portrayal of Fusang often retains the male perspective and the white historian's perspective dwelt on Fusang in a parodic way, which imply value judgment of the narrator and the implied author. With all these narrative tactics, the implied author takes a critical stance against the male perspective and Western centrism.

The focusing function of a second-person narrator enables Fusang to become the focus of multiple perspectives, placing Fusang at the visual center of the narration, thus unifying the multiple perspectives superimposed in the narration. This narrative feature is exemplified in the description of Fusang facing the white teenager Chris:

> You are aware of your oddly shaped feet, the high collar that binds your neck and the cold bracelet made of artificial jade. You are aware of the breath and heartbeat of every embroidered flower on your pink gown (Yan, 2010, p. 36).

Multiple perspectives are like the overlapping of camera filters, which can preserve the characteristics of every filter in the same visual layer simultaneously. Judging from the word "aware", this text seems to be based on Fusang's perspective. On second thought, the source of perception is the narrator, "I," and the reader observes Fusang through the narrator's perspective on top of Fu-

sang's perspective. However, when reading the text carefully, the reader will find out that the picture is also pervaded by oriental symbols from the perspective of Orientalist: the strange little feet, the high collar, the bracelets made of artificial jade, the embroidery on the pink gown – this is a completely alien gaze, with a sense of curiosity, from the perspective of a white historian. The descriptions of the two body organs, the feet and the neck, are again characterized by the male gaze, thus, the perspective of Chris. The organization of the aforementioned analysis leads to the structure of multiple perspectives (See the schematic chart below):

Narrator("I") - White historian (racial gaze) - Chris (male gaze) - Fusang("you")

[fourth perspective] -- [third perspective] -- [second perspective] -- [first perspective]

Focus: Fusang Focus: Fusang Focus: Fusang Focus: Fusang (herself)

The narrator, "I," as an observer, restores Fusang's bodily perception in her self-gaze with Chris' male perspective by looking through the Chinatown history books written by the white historians prevailing Orientalism. The narrator also brings together the perspectives of "I," the white historian and Chris that all focusing on Fusang, with the adoption of second-person narration to enhance this convergence effect.

Similarly, the text"I looked at your face in the candlelight. I could not see any trace of the 'low price'" can also be used to analyze the structure of perspective.

Narrator "I" (critical) – White historian (racial gaze) – Fusang
[Second Perspective] – [First Perspective] Focus
Focus:Fusang Focus: Fusang

In this text, there is a dual perspective of the narrator "I" and the white historian focusing on Fusang. Unlike the previous example, the "you" in this text only serves as the focus and does not contain a self-gazing perspective; moreover, the first-person "I" is not only a transposer of the white historian's perspective or a purely visual perceiver. Instead, the narrator “I” attaches clear value jud-

gments to it. Although the narrator "I" does not agree with the accounts from the Western historian's perspective (like "low price"), she does not completely erase the traces of this perspective. Instead, she retains these traces and denies the historical biography through the commentary with a strong negation of the historical narrative (like "I could not see any trace of"). In this way, she attempts to reshape the character of Fusang and rewrite the cultural history of Chinese-American females. The two different value judgments coexist in the aforementioned double perspective, and they are converged on Fusang through the second-person "you", making her the focus of contradiction between the two opposite value judgments. Thus the contrast between the juxtaposition of the two judgments is represented in a way that is much more distinct and intense. The perspective of the narrator "I" is placed above the perspective of the white historian, which exerts a more obvious influence on the reader with its visual domination.

III. The Mutual Gazing Space With a Combination of First-person and Second-person Narratives

As the narrator, "I" can control the external form of discourse describing Fusang (such as obscuring the response from Fusang that might exist or using free direct quotation to record Fusang's dialogue with others without quotation marks, etc.), but “I” cannot control the visual representations of the character in the discursive space. Although Fusang is in the position of being silenced by the narrator, she rebels against the authority of the gaze by looking backwards at the viewer "I" despite of her aphasia. With the "mutual gazing space", she realizes the communication between the first– and fifth-generation immigrants.

Yet the space for dialogue between "you" and "I" is suppressed, Yan Geling creates a "mutual gazing space" with the combination of first– and second-person narratives. In the first mutual gaze between Fusang and "I", "I" is placed under the scrutinizing gaze of

"you" (i.e. Fusang), and is transformed from the subject of the gaze to the object being gazed. The identity is then revealed in the text: "a book writer at the end of the twentieth century", "a fifth-generation Chinese immigrant". Under Fusang's gaze, "I" also feels confused about her own existence, stating "I never knew the reason that made me cross the Pacific Ocean" and "didn't know what I was looking for. " It indicates that the narrator's certainty when she was telling Fusang's story is weakened, and the narrator is plunged into a state of uncertainty:

> This is when you look at me at the end of the twentieth century – me as a book writer. You wonder if it was the same reason that brought me to this exotic dock called "Gold Mountain". I never knew what brought me across the Pacific Ocean. We pay lip service to freedom, learning, and wealth, but we don't really know what we are looking for.
> Some people call us the fifth generation of Chinese immigrants (Yan, 2010, p. 3).

Fusang's reverse gaze has a power that is sometimes clearly defiant to the narrator's gaze:

> Who am I going to stare at when you stare at me like that questioningly?
> Okay, let me try to express your feelings. Let me make a cup of coffee first and refine my words, otherwise I won't be able to express this feeling even with a whole book.
> Anyway, if I can't write it right, I can blot it and rewrite.
> Things are not what you think...
> Not right? Let's start over – (Yan, 2010, p. 165).

In this excerpt, Fusang not only looks at "me" but also expresses her opposition to the story narrated by "me" with her questioningly stare. The narrator, "I", becomes the object and the watched object instead. In the end, the authority of "I" is shaken by Fusang's questioning gaze, and changes the words "I" has already written, becoming an unreliable narrator. The opposition between

the second-person "you" and the first-person "I" makes the reversal of subject and object more prominent.

With the subjectification of the second-person, Fusang still does not attain the right to speak, however she manages to communicate with "I" through gazing. Martin Jay points out that the eye is not just a passive receptor of light and color. It is also the most expressive of the sensory organs and is capable of projecting, indicating, and radiating powerful emotions with clarity (1994, p.9). This makes communication between "you" and "I" possible in the space of the opposite eyes. The "stare" and the "look" with surprise and pity are both expressions of Fusang's emotions. In fact, Fusang does not have power over "me", let alone the desire for "me", so instead of considering Fusang's reverse viewing of me as a kind of gaze with the connotations of power and desire, it should be seen as a way of communication and expressing emotions. The response of "I" to Fusang's gaze proves that the communication between the two sides in the space of the gaze is achieved.

In short, the combination of first– and second-person in Fusang creates a mutual gazing space by constructing an opposition between "you" and "I". Compared with the tendency of othering in the third-person narrative, the objectified mutual opposition between "you" and "I" is more obvious, which prepares the prerequisite for the inversion of the subject-object and the communication between subjects, and finally completes the visual communication in the visual space.

This mutual gazing space is mediated by timeless visual images, and it constructs a link between the first generation of Chinese American female immigrants and the fifth generation of female immigrants in different historical space-time. It aims to shorten the distance between the two at the visual narrative level, creating the illusion that they are in common space-time. It is worth noting that the narrator of the text, "I", who is concerned about the historical plight of Fusang, is a fifth-generation female immigrant instead of a descendant of first-generation immigrants born in the United States. Although there is a lineage relationship between the descendants of first-generation immigrants and their

elder generation, they are more disconnected from the experience of first-generation immigrants and find it difficult to understand Fusang because they have been assimilated into American culture and do not feel the pain and anxiety of moving away from their homeland. However, as a fifth-generation immigrant, "I" shares similar spiritual dilemmas with the first-generation immigrants, so she is more sensitive to the racial and male gaze that minority females suffer in American society. That is the reason why “I” was chosen to be the storyteller of Fusang.

In addition, the difficulties in understanding between "I" and her white husband due to cultural differences is also a parallel to the mutual misunderstanding between "you" and Chris, a white teenager, reflecting the dilemma of Chinese-American female in inter-ethnic love:

> I can't remember how many moments my husband's gray sunken eyes and my eyes met, and we shuddered, fascinated by our differences and the desire to know each other so that no matter how intimate we were with each other, it didn't count, and in the shudder we were stuck in the unfamiliar and the fresh, in an impasse of sense.
> You see, you and Chris are stuck in the same impasse right now (Yan, 2010, p. 36).

It demonstrates that whether it is "you" or "I", the situation of Chinese females has never really changed in American society with racism and male-dominated orders, and the social problems have never been solved through the centuries. Therefore, the narrator "I" sees herself in Fusang’s life, and therefore in the mutual gazing space formed in her imagination, Fusang is a mirror-like projection of "I" in some way. In short, the creation of the mutual gazing space is based on the spiritual dilemma and crisis shared by the first–generation immigrants and the fifth generation new immigrants, reflecting the difficult situation of Chinese female new immigrants in American society in terms of identity and intimate relationships. In the mutual gazing space, the intersubjectivity between Fusang

and the narrator "I" is a rebellion against the current orders of male-dominated American society, and it is also a part of rewritten history of American-Chinese females.

Conclusion

Through the perspective of the narrator "I", the author Yan Geling rewrites the history through her writing, repainting the portrait of a Chinese female deformed in the historical records of American society, thus overshadowing the orientalist gaze of white colonialists in the piles of old documents. With the reconstruction of visual spaces and visual relations in the text, her work rebels Orientalism and the American patriarchal society and rewrites the cultural history as “herstory”.

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