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ATTRIBUTES OF SIGNS IN SHANGHAI GIRLS: AN OVERTONE OF CHINESE ZODIAC

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ABSTRACT

Lisa See is a contemporary writer from Los Angeles and has written novels such as *Dragon Bones*, *The Interior*, *Peony in Love*, a memoir *On Gold Mountain*. Her first book, *On Gold Mountain: The One Hundred Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family* (1995), is a national bestseller and a New York Times Notable Book. The organization of Chinese American Women has named the 2001 National Woman of the year. Her writings deal with stories that have been lost, forgotten, or deliberately hidden, both in the past and in the contemporary social milieu. *Shanghai Girls* (2009) is a story of two loving sisters who experience the challenges that life force on them. They give up their western tradition in order to become ideal wives and daughters-in-law after their marriage to the Louis family in America. See has designed her characters in a unique way by implying their Chinese birth signs. It is believed in Chinese mythology that the years represented by the zodiac animals affect the characters of people. The Chinese believe that there is correlation between humans and the twelve zodiacal animals.

Keywords: Chinese calendar, Zodiac Signs, Myths, Characterization, Animal attributes.

INTRODUCTION

Culture of a nation is well established by its myths. Myths are pivotal part of the cultural backdrop as they enlighten people about culture and values by highlighting moral issues. "Chinese Mythology is a collection of cultural history, folktales, and religious tradition that has been passed down for centuries in oral or written form"(1). Chinese myths and legends were in the form of oral tradition for nearly thousands of years initially.

These later found their places in books and novels which serve as a source of authentication today. Books such as *Fengshen Yanyi*, *Shui Jing Zhu* and *Shan Hai Jing* provide details about the Chinese myths. *Fengshen Yanyi* or Anointing of the Gods is a mythological fiction that deals with the founding of Zhou dynasty. *Shui Jing Zhu* deals with history and geography of China. *Shan Hai Jing* gives an account of ancient China, its sea, mountain, customs and medicines. 'Zhiguai' is a literary genre that deals with supernatural events and stories in China.

Shanghai Girls (2009) is set in 1937 which carves the lives of two beautiful young sisters Pearl and May. The two girls lead a very happy life by adopting their ever-cherishing western modern life. They are

exceedingly beautiful that they pose for photographs and calendars to “Z.G. Li, the best of the artists who specialize in beautiful- girl calendars, posters, and advertisements” (10). They most often prefer wearing the customary Chinese dress ‘cheongsams’ which make them feel that they belong to their homeland. While Pearl speaks the dialect of Sze Yup, May speaks Wu dialect. As May fails to comprehend the Sze Yup, Pearl and her parents use it as a secret language. Their family belong to the bourgeois class, and followed the “religion of *ch’ung yang*: worshipping all things foreign” (11).

Chinese Anthropogeny

Chinese mythology sets the foundation of Chinese culture. In Chinese socio-cultural belief system, myth, witchcraft, religion, history, geography, ethnicity, legends and customs are important in understanding the Chinese cultural world. There are many mythical stories of creation of the first humans that serve as a source of understanding Chinese Anthropogeny. For instance, Nuwa, wife of Fuxi is believed to have created the human race in the country of China. She is half- snake and half- human and is worshipped by the ancients as the ancestor of all humankind. Collier states that, “Although most gods were male, Nuwa is a very powerful female goddess in early mythology. She creates mankind and is responsible for repairing the earth” (24). The Jade Emperor is believed to be the most important of the Chinese deities. He is the Emperor of Heaven in Chinese folklore. Although his origins are unknown, he is considered to be the first god in charge of all other gods and goddesses.

Chinese Zodiacal Culture

An analysis of Chinese mythology would be deficient if the role of animal signs is excluded. The myths proclaim about Chinese zodiacal culture that the animal signs are prevalent in Chinese belief system. It is said that the benevolent Jade Emperor conducted a race on condition that the first twelve animals that finish the race would be chosen for the zodiac sign in Chinese calendar. The animals have to cross a river in order to find their place in Chinese calendar. While the Emperor witnessed the race, the Rat, the Ox and the Tiger were the first to finish the race thereby becoming the first three animals of the zodiac. The race comes to a halt when the required number of twelve animals is chosen for the calendar.

The Chinese calendar year is based on the new lunar year. Every cycle of new lunar year is named after an animal. Werner gives an outline of Chinese wildlife as, “The wild animals include the tiger, panther, leopard, bear, sable, otter, monkey, wolf, fox, twenty-seven or more species of ruminants, and numerous species of rodents” (11). The animals in the calendar are referred to as Chinese zodiac animals. Every animal sign has its unique characteristic features. A person who belongs to a particular animal sign possesses attributes that pertain to that animal.

Myth

Myths are a segment of Chinese cultural body. It is the interpretation and understanding of social events through analysis of their meanings for the human participants in the events. Dorairaj states the role of myth in interpreting social customs as follows:

... myths play a definite communitarian role by bringing societies together through rites and rituals.

They are normative as well and play a prescriptive and even legitimizing role as far as the ethos of a community is concerned, bringing to light the close association between “mythos” and ethos. (30)

The Collins Dictionary states that Ethos is a “set of ideas and attitudes that is associated with a particular group of people or a particular type of activity” (1). Also, Mythos is stated in the Collins Dictionary as “the complex of beliefs, values, attitudes, etc. characteristic of a specific group or society” (1). Therefore culture is best understood with an aid of sociological convictions into which myth best fits in.

Animal Sign

In China, it is a common question for people to ask about one’s animal sign. People are reluctant to know another person’s age. On the contrary, their curiosity dwells in knowing about the animal sign under which they were born. The Chinese Zodiac is based on a twelve-year cycle each of which is represented by an

animal sign. These signs are of the order rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog and pig. Each animal sign tends to represent a particular human attribute.

According to the Chinese belief, “four calendars depicting the four seasons” (206) is hung on the walls of every house. The calendars have a prominent role in the lives of the Chinese people. See herself confirms the strong belief of the Chinese in signs. She writes, “...a calendar is the most important thing in life for every Chinese” (15). She further confirms the strong belief of the Chinese in signs by saying that, “Whether rich or poor, people regulate their lives by the sun, the moon, the stars...” (15).

Naming – An Integral Part of Tradition

The tradition of giving names to children is also an important part of the Chinese tradition. See, in *Shanghai Girls*, has crafted a unique method of giving names to her characters. As she rightly says, “Naming is important” (121) in Chinese culture. Her characters are named after the calendar years which are evident from the lines, “May is supposed to be as complacent and content as the Sheep in whose year she was born” (9). The protagonist Pearl is born in the year of Dragon and her mother says that, “A Dragon fights fate” (82). They share the generational name which Pearl says, “We share *Long*__ Dragon__ as our generational name. I am Pearl Dragon, and May is Beautiful Dragon...in Mandarin *mei* is one of the words for *beautiful*, and she is that” (9). According to M.H. Abrams, “Characters are the persons represented in a dramatic or narrative work, who are interpreted by the reader as possessing particular moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities” (33). Almost all the characters in the novel possess qualities peculiar for themselves which is comparable to the zodiac year in which they were born.

Yanzi Chen in his dissertation titled “The Twelve Animals: An Interactive Guide to the Chinese Zodiac Signs” says that, “The Chinese believe the animal ruling one’s birth year has a profound influence on personality, career, love, life, health, lifestyle and destiny” (10). The characters in the novel have a greater association with the Chinese zodiac. Their innate traits and talents are strongly bound to their animal sign.

Animal Sign and Human Attributes

A novel about two loving sisters, Pearl and May who face all odds and challenges in their life but still hold a strong bond of sisterhood. May is the younger sibling who is unconditionally loved by her parents. She is married to Vern who is a differently abled boy- husband. May clings to her sister all the time. She is born in the Year of Sheep and takes up the qualities of complacency and contentment that are insignia of Sheep. See brings out the traits of a Sheep through the words of Pearl’s mother, Mama:

It’s fashionable, artistic, and compassionate. The Sheep needs someone to take care of her, so she’ll always be sure to have food, shelter, and clothing. At the same time, the Sheep is known to smother others with affection. Good fortune smiles on the Sheep because of its peaceful nature and kind heart... the Sheep sometimes thinks only of itself and its own comforts. (9)

May’s self- centered nature is revealed when she remains happy and smiling even amidst Pearl’s suffering. See by comparing May to a Sheep, tells how she leads a parasitic life. She remains silent even when her illegitimate child Joy is adopted by Pearl.

Lisa See exemplifies Chinese zodiac through another character Sam. He is not a real son but a paper-son of old man Louie who lives in America’s Chinatown. Paper-son is a concept by which a young male is expected to earn for the father who adopted him. He is married to Pearl. He is born in the Year of Ox. “People born in the Year of Ox bear persistent, simple, honest, and straightforward characteristics” (1). Ox is the second of the Chinese Zodiac signs. Born under this sign, he lacks imagination and forever pulls the burdens of the world, has willpower and inner stamina. Lisa See proclaims the qualities of Sam through the words of Violet who says: “He had integrity and bore the burdens of righteousness. He followed the rules of nature, patiently pushing the wheel of fate. He was not afraid of his destiny...An Ox will always do whatever is needed to protect his family’s welfare__” (293). Sam works hard like a beast of burden as rickshaw puller. He gives his earnings to Old Man Louie.

Generosity is a trait that is peculiar to the sign of Ox. Sam resonates as a desirable husband. He wishes to afford a good future for Joy even after knowing that she is not his biological daughter. His tragic end by committing suicide is not looked upon as cowardice but rather shows his concern for the family. His

muteness in revealing the identity to the Immigrant Officers saves the family from being exiled. Sam dies a noble death, safeguarding the qualities of a true Ox.

Vern is another important character portrayed by See. He remains immobile throughout the novel. He is differently abled and is married to May. He is born in the Year of Boar who, "With a strong interior grasp of their life and the people around them, they are able to spend much time both alone and in the company of others" (1). Vern spends most of his time in seclusion when Pearl, May, Joy and Sam are at work. He is the legitimate son of Old Man Louie. He leads a simple and sincere life as said by Mama, "Boar has a pure heart, that it has great honesty and simplicity" (142). His marriage with May is a happy union with no hurt feelings. Vern never enforces heavily upon May. He is not domineering and May's freedom is always uninfluenced.

The next character in line with the other major characters is Joy who belongs to the next generation. She is born with the Tiger sign and is the daughter of May and Z.G. Li. Joy is deceived of her parentage and believes that Sam is her father. She addresses her real mother as 'Auntie May', Pearl as 'mother', and Sam as 'Dad'. Her grandmother Yen-Yen outlines that, "Like a Tiger, Joy can be temperamental and volatile. One minute she's brimming over with giddiness; the next she can dissolve into tears" (162). Her persistence is perceptible when she dares to take up her studies in Chicago.

Joy participates in communist activities with the acquaintance of Joe. She pens down her thoughts about a Chinese writer Lu Hsun. She appears like a delicate willow branch outside, "but inside she's still a Tiger" (261). When the hidden truth about her parentage is revealed, she stealthily walks out of the house to meet her real father in China. This shows her unfathomable courage as a young girl.

The protagonist is Pearl Chin, who is named by her father. She and her sister May share their generational name Long – Dragon. Her father gives her the name Pearl Dragon as she is born in the Year of the Dragon. The sign of Dragon is so powerful that, "...of all the signs only a Dragon can tame the fates. Only a Dragon can wear the horns of destiny, duty, and power" (76). She is portrayed as a dutiful sister and a wife.

Pearl irrevocably loves her sister and feels as if a part of her is missing when she is separated from May. Taken away by betrayal and fear, her parents send them to America as China- brides. She often reminisces the words of her mother who says, "Keep something for yourself" (65). It shows how Pearl is dutiful as a daughter, sister and a wife too. She fights all odds that are imposed on her by her parents in homeland and parents-in-law in the new land- Chinatown. Her Mama tells her, "A Dragon doesn't surrender. A Dragon fights fate" (82). Thus Pearl fights her fate with a steely resolve. Pearl is introduced as a beautiful girl of western thinking. As the story advances, she recollects the knowledge of her mother about the Chinese zodiac. She comes in to believing that what her mother had told is not an illusion. She proclaims that:

...there was a time when I didn't believe in these things, but that was a long time ago. I know in my heart that my sister is forever a Sheep, that I'm forever a Dragon, that Joy is forever a Tiger, and that my husband was an Ox__dependable, methodical, calm, and, as Violet said, the bearer of so many burdens. (293)

These words of Pearl insinuate how life of a Chinese-American is bound to some customary beliefs.

Conclusion

Lisa See's *Shanghai Girls* is thus a rich blend of Chinese culture, customs, traditions and history. A lot of Chinese customs are also echoed. Food culture, funeral culture and dress culture are some of the cultures worth mentioning. To know about China means knowing its myths. Animal signs are not mere caricatures but a magnificent part of Chinese culture. The implication of signs to draw the rich characters is a magnificent endeavor being an eye-opener to examine the Chinese horoscope. See has characterized Pearl as the protagonist who strives with a never-give-up attitude towards strangled moments in life. This emanates the Chinese American spirit that flutters and flies high with a touch of positivity.

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