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Megan M. Ferry

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Marketing Chinese Women Writers in the 1990s, or the Politics of Self-Fashioning

MEGAN M. FERRY*

This article examines the sensation a young group of woman writers are causing in 1990s China. Variouslly named the 'New, New Generation', or Glam Lit writers, these women have received critical attention from the literary field and the market. While critics debate the seriousness of their literature, publishing houses are producing their literature at a rapid pace. A governmental ban on the works of two authors, Zhou Weihui and Mian Mian, has fueled readership of black market copies and spurred commentary on the Internet. I argue that the unbridled female sexuality that fuels the sensation of these writers is driven by the publishing market and cultural production, with the complicity of women authors themselves. While the article is critical of the media for exploiting female sexuality, it is also critical of the ambivalence these women writers have toward their own sexuality as well as the authority their writing accords them. While their writings bring discussion of female sexuality to a public forum that previously denied such discussion, they also reinforce stereotyped notions of female sexuality. I point out that while the authors seek to manipulate the market and cultural forces to achieve self-representation they paradoxically support the very same essentialized understanding of female sexuality that the market, critics, and publishers uphold. Ultimately, the article questions whether the public consumption of female sexuality, as witnessed in the sensation these young writers have caused, undermines women's literary agency and self-representation.

Dressed in fashionable attire the female writer as bad girl is back in town. She made a splashy sensation in the headlines, is on the tip of all gossiping tongues, and meets the wrath of bureaucrats who criticize her unrestrained decadence. A different kind of cultural revolution hit the China scene in the 1990s, in smoky bars, on neon-lit streets, and on the net. What seems to be now at stake is not the liberation of the people but of the individuals and their right to consume. Concurrently, we are witnessing the revived struggle for recognition of the woman author in the midst of a mediatized and commercialized consumption of the female. As China traverses the endless road to modernity, the wayward ways of unruly

* Megan M. Ferry is Luce Junior Professor of Chinese at Union College. The author would like to thank Sabina Knight, Yomi Braester, Lu Jie, and colleagues in the reading group at Union College for their readings and comments on drafts of this paper.

women, especially those who write, are held in check. Although this phenomenon is nothing new and takes its cue from the unfinished project of early twentieth-century China to liberate the woman writer, it presents today's Chinese women with a predicament peculiar to feminism and women's liberation.

This paper explores the sensation that some women writers have caused in the 1990s by examining the works themselves and the 'paratexts' (those elements that appear alongside their works).¹ While female sexuality has re-emerged from decades of state-controlled 'erasure of gender and sexuality' (*xingbie mosha*),² sex has become a popular topic in literature, academic research, and commercial magazines specifically targeted at young women and men. Yet despite the pro-sexuality climate of the 1990s, the appropriation of female sexuality by the market, cultural advocates, and women writers themselves de-politicizes their literature and divests women of the chance to construct an identity independent of oversimplified notions of sexuality. Moreover, women writers' apparent complicity with the hypervisibility of the female in the 1990s underscores just how market driven contemporary Chinese literature has become. The market and media that promises the freedom of the individual plays an important role in the construction of a female identity that does not necessarily grant women agency. I argue in this paper that despite the sexual revolution that young Chinese women writers are enjoying, such a revolution comes with a price, particularly at a cost to female sexual autonomy in an increasingly capital-driven cultural economy in China. The problem becomes that of how to balance the public exploration of female sexuality with female authorship.

What drives the sensationalism of a new group of woman writers, called the '*shixiang nüxing wenxue*' (fashionable women's literature), '*meiren wenxue*' (beautiful woman literature), '*xinxinrenlei wenxue*' (new, new generation literature), or '*linglei wenxue*' (literature of the unconventional), is not just their laying bare 'women's real experiences', their youth, or their gender, but their unabashed sexuality.³ These are women who write of 'problem girls' living in an atmosphere of drugs, prostitution, and homosexuality. As a result, these writers have been criticized for not only disrespecting Chinese literature, but also for being irresponsible about its future.⁴ But why should a woman's public exploration of alternative sexualities elicit a governmental ban on the works of, for example, Zhou Weihui and Mian Mian? Do these texts represent a threat to traditional notions of womanhood and sanctioned authorial behavior? More importantly, are these works undermining any project of self-determination?

This group of writers, so named because they were born in the 1970s and are women, joins a historical continuum of women writers in making space for the flourishing of women's texts and their exploration of sexuality. Yet whereas

1. Gerard Genette, 'Introduction to the paratext', *New Literary History* 22(2), (Spring 1991), pp. 261–272.

2. Mayfair Yang, 'Introduction', in *Spaces of Their Own. Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 41.

3. Writers who are often named as part of this group are Zhou Weihui, Mian Mian, Zhou Jiegu, Wei Wei, Zhu Wenying, etc.

4. Wen Bo, 'Guanyu "Qishiniandai yihou" de pingshuo' ['Regarding the critique of "after the 70s" generation'], *Nanfang Wentan* [Southern Cultural Forum] 73, (1999), pp. 59–60.

women writers of early twentieth-century China sought to find themselves in the circle of 'humanity', this 1990s generation reveals that the enlightenment project has been usurped by a commercial takeover. In place of searching for woman's 'rengē' (personality)⁵ lies the project to expose the private lives of women for public consumption. Since women's sexuality in the twentieth century was tied to larger issues of cultural identity and modernity, our understanding of the female literary self cannot ignore its transnational and capitalist dimensions.⁶ At the heart of this process lies a quest for women's literary autonomy that works against, and sometimes with, identifiable tropes of sexualized women. In this paper I demonstrate how the cultural sphere continues to essentialize women's sexuality and ask if contemporary women are effectively using this essentialism to gain a 'space of their own' as they seek to give authenticity to their writings or if they are perpetuating (and enhancing) gender distinctions set up by a Chinese patriarchal system. Ultimately, this paper questions whether the public consumption of female sexuality, as witnessed in the sensation these young writers have caused, undermines women's literary agency and self-representation.

By essentialized woman I refer to the social, cultural, and political properties attributed to what it means to be a woman in an historical context. Such properties assist in the formation of identity and in the interpretation of one's history,⁷ an identity that informs how one defines an authentic subject. The contemporary Chinese woman constructs a self-representation partly based on stereotyped appropriations of a femininity informed by emotions, narcissism, desire, etc. Such attributes present themselves as 'authentic' representations of a woman's life and become the means by which her life is mediated. This 'pseudo self' not only masquerades as 'natural', but also becomes 'a monopoly commodity determined by society'.⁸ That is, 'woman' acquires a market value in today's society, but the woman herself has limited agency in her self-representation.

In the 1990s, women's sexuality is on public display and this translates into the need for women to possess a visibly sexualized public persona. In light of the fact that individuality is coveted over the collectivized identity of previous generations, the construction of the female individual 'self' relies on validation from a culture that values woman for the spectacle she embodies. The success of the female individual is measured in terms of social and economic independence, which assumes that women are well adjusted to an evolving consumerist culture. A woman's supposed social value increases with the greater sensation she causes. Here I discuss how this spectacle gets created and who is controlling it.

I will highlight the writings of two women authors, Zhou Weihui and Mian Mian, in order to familiarize readers with how these writers perceive their roles as

5. Zhou Zuoren, 'Humane literature', in Kirk Denton, ed., *Modern Chinese Literary Thought. Writings on Literature 1893–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 151–161.

6. Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua, *Fuchu lishi dibiao [Emerging from the Horizons of History]* (Henan renmin chubanshe, 1989); Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice. Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900–1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Mayfair Yang, *Spaces of Their Own*.

7. Teresa de Lauretis, 'Upping the anti[sic] in feminist theory', in Simon During, ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 74–87 at p. 84.

8. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, 'The culture industry; enlightenment as mass deception', in During, ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader*, pp. 29–43 at p. 41.

authors and women in contemporary China. Though the two seek notoriety by discussing socially taboo subjects, their writings reveal an ambivalence about their sexuality. This is especially evident in how they present their disparate roles as women and writers. I will then discuss how the works of these authors fit into the contemporary literary scene and how the reception of their works has augmented the sensationalism. Finally, I will demonstrate how the market capitalizes on this sensation to create an exaggerated, media-driven representation of a female 'authenticity'. Such an authenticity is not bound to women's self-discovery per se, but to the growing demands of global capital that is driven by the hypervisibility of the female.

Shanghai babes: Wei Hui and Mian Mian

New writing sensation Wei Hui boasts that she is 'China's first banned pornographic female novelist'.⁹ She notes that the Chinese novel has never seen her style of writing before, by which she means 'fashionable, full of a feminine sensitivity that shocks people, has sex appeal, and is sentimental'.¹⁰ For her, writing is a means of expression: 'I must express myself at my own peril. I express to survive'.¹¹ Indeed, she considers herself to be the spokesperson of her generation of writers ('*dushi linglei daiyanren*' an urban unconventional spokesperson), whose manifesto is one of experiences, or simply put, 'materialist consumption, uncontrolled emotions, constant belief in the impulse of one's heart, to submit to the deep burning of one's spirit, to give in to craziness, to prostrate oneself to every desire, to entertain all kinds of life's elation with greatest passion, including the mysteries of orgasm ...'.¹² For Wei Hui, these elements represent the authentic (*zhenshi*) self over the social norm that requires women to be dignified and appropriate.¹³ She speaks of looking into herself when she writes, of looking for what is fresh, innovating, and exciting. As a woman, she writes, she is addicted to high black boots, electronic music, poetry of death, witchcraft, and blinding passions. Furthermore, she insists she must see her reflection in every mirror.¹⁴ Yet Wei Hui plays with the notion of an authentic self, shying away from the image of a pristine college educated woman, while denying that the fictional bad girls she presents have any likeness to herself. Indeed, many interviewers have written of her elusiveness, of the inability to pin her down, of the many 'Wei Hui's' they have confronted, and her ability to leave them wondering 'if she is abnormal, or if [they

9. Associated Press, *Chinese Censors Create a Star* [online], LatelineNews: 9 July 2000 [cited 6 April 2001]. Available from World Wide Web: < <http://dailynews.muzy.com/cgi/lateline/news.cgi?l = english&a = express&p = 76566> > .

10. *Wei Hui shuohuale* [Wei Hui Speaks] [online], Wei Hui's homepage, sponsored by Goldnets, My Rice.com [cited 6 April 2001]. Available from World Wide Web: < <http://www.goldnets.com/wh/line-i.htm> > .

11. *Kuihua zhice: ji Shanghai xinshengdai nüzuojia Wei Hui* [The Sunflower's Thorn: Remembering Shanghai New Generation Writer Wei Hui] [online], Wei Hui's homepage, sponsored by Goldnets, Myrice.com [cited on 6 April 2001]. Available from World Wide Web: < <http://www.goldnets.com/wh/line-a.htm> > .

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. Wei Hui, untitled [online], from Wei Hui's homepage, sponsored by Goldnets, Myrice.com [cited on 6 April 2001]. Available from World Wide Web: < www.goldnets.com/wh/test-timeline.htm > .

are] abnormal?’¹⁵ She considers herself to be the ‘public’s rose’, while others have considered her to be poisonous.¹⁶

Wei Hui writes that she hopes readers think her real self constitutes the one half that readers like about her characters.¹⁷ But this enigmatic, self-described ‘real’ Wei Hui conflates the boundaries between who she perceives herself to be, her ideal self, the self that readers see, and the entity that is market-inspired. Indeed, Wei Hui considers herself to be like her female characters, crazy and determined to be writers.¹⁸ Both she and her characters grasp at ‘any special characteristic’ to demonstrate that ‘writing and existing are like flourishing vines; their bodies intertwined inseparably and irrationally, regardless of their growth’.¹⁹ Such characteristics are embodied in the projection of ‘cool’, a favorite term used by writers of her generation. But ironically, such coolness includes themes common to traditional womanhood: desire for love, beauty, and noticeability.

Wei Hui claims that her writings are semi-autobiographical, especially her new novel *Shanghai Baby* (*Shanghai baobei*). *Shanghai Baby* is about a young, college-educated woman writer who lives with her drug addict Chinese boyfriend and has an affair with a German businessman. CoCo is torn between the deep love she has for her impotent boyfriend and the sexual drive she has toward her lover. Throughout the novel CoCo, unable to reconcile love with sexuality, struggles to write her own fictional story. This novel, according to CoCo, will be a sensation. Her sole ambition is to make herself famous and ‘to burst upon the city like fireworks’.²⁰ But CoCo is aware that she faces obstacles, especially since her psychoanalyst tells her that her ‘nature as a female and as a writer [doom] [her] to chaos’ (p. 35). This chaos is perhaps the self-sacrifice that befalls every female writer who writes to reveal her ‘authentic’ self. Or at least, this is what CoCo wants us to believe. To give credibility to her authorship, CoCo says she often writes naked to lend authenticity to her voice, to give up lying and embellishing in order to present a ‘genuine version of [her] life before the public’s eye’ (p. 167).

The newly found consciousness that CoCo attains about herself through the act of writing reveals the difficulty of maintaining self-esteem in an increasingly global capitalist society. Whereas she relished showing her bikini-clad body in public before she started to write, once she began writing the novel she realized that she had become self-conscious and angry. ‘Feminism reared its head. What was it that made me seem so like an empty-headed Barbie doll? Those men probably couldn’t guess I was a novelist who’d just shut herself in a room for seven days and seven nights, and they probably couldn’t care less either’ (p. 173). CoCo wants to be independent from men and her literary critics, but at the same time she longs for their admiration and sees her value measured in how successfully she attracts them.

15. *Kuihua zhice*.

16. *Tuanzi, fengkuang de Wei Hui [Crazy Wei Hui]* [online], sponsored by Goldnets, Myrice.com [cited on 6 April 2001]. Available from World Wide Web: < <http://www.goldnets.com/wh/line-b.htm> > . Also available in *Ougang xinxi ribao*, (4 December 1999).

17. *Wei Hui shuohuale*.

18. Wei Hui, *Tong bing kuailizhe [Being Sorrowful and Happy]*, *Nanfang wentan [Southern Cultural Forum]* 73, (1999), p. 46.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Wei Hui, *Shanghai Baby*, translated by Bruce Humes (New York: Pocket Books, 2001), p. 1.

She seeks to balance the role of serious writer and sexualized woman, as is evident in one scene where she masturbates with one hand while holding a pen in the other. But such an act does not give her a sense of power as much as it fills her with ‘a slight sense of disgust’ (p. 169). A literary masterpiece in her mind must draw its impetus from a sense of loss and rootlessness, not from the pleasure she derives from thinking about ‘women’s exotic gardens [that have been awaiting] the invasion of the opposite sex’ (p. 169). CoCo is thus unable to strike a balance between her notions of what it means to be a writer and a woman.

Whereas CoCo revels in the surface attraction of femininity that she projects to her admirers, she exhibits a self-loathing of a core womanliness by writing such things as ‘Shanghai winter is wet and disgusting, like a woman’s period’ (p. 86). Menstruation becomes the obstacle to her desire to mold herself to the social and literary ideal woman. Menstruation interrupts the superficial construct of woman created by media, fiction, and film that CoCo has come to see as her own definition of femininity. Moreover, such a superficiality precludes her from becoming a ‘serious’ writer.

The tension between her roles as writer and as woman finds its resolution in sacrifice and loss. As her novel nears completion, CoCo writes how the act of writing takes a toll on her physically: ‘I felt like I was getting thinner. My body fluids were becoming black ink, oozing out of me into my pen, trickling into each word and phrase I wrote’ (p. 112). In her sexual encounters with the German, Mark, she finds the experience enjoyable but often painful or unpleasant. In one encounter she feels like a whore (p. 74), a China doll who is looking for a foreigner in order to leave China (p. 208), a rape victim who is sexually aroused at the slightest touch (p. 239), a victim of a fascist predator (p. 251). But it is through these sexual encounters with a foreigner that CoCo discovers that despite the demystification of sex that feminism has brought to China since the 1980s, there is still so much about herself that she does not know or understand. The novel ends with her Chinese lover, Tiantian, dead of an overdose, her German lover returned to Germany to be with his wife and child, and her novel just completed. CoCo has plans to throw a big party to celebrate the completion of her novel, including using the pages of her novel for confetti (p. 70). Despite this decadent gesture she recognizes the lack of control she has over how her book is received. She writes ambivalently of her novel’s reception, noting that male readers asked her if she would ever strip while women readers asked if women are really inferior to men? (p. 259). One reads the conclusion of Wei Hui’s novel not so much as a triumph of the woman writer CoCo but as a question mark. Despite the writer’s triumph in getting her book published, one is left wondering at the end if anything was gained. Does this conclusion put the writer where she really wants to be?

Wei Hui has stated elsewhere that she does not want to be like ordinary people, and writes to break away from the common.²¹ She admits, however, that she is living with ‘chaotic contradictions’. That is, she both desires a clearly demarcated individual space, and yearns for the warmth of the collective.²² She writes that

21. *Tong bing kuailizhe.*

22. *Wei Hui shuohuale.*

unconventionality is a common part of her life, but that she and others of her generation have not yet found the 'key to the cultural system of the new generation'.²³ She ends her novel with CoCo asking 'Who am I?' (p. 263). It is perhaps in this final statement that Wei Hui reveals several contradictions for contemporary women writers.

On the one hand, writing is a way to reveal and to understand women's social and cultural histories, but on the other hand, it is a way to find acceptance within an imposed social and cultural space, by way of becoming famous, or trying to conform to popular notions of the feminine. Wei Hui's analogy between writing, the body, and its fluids, while co-opting the long-held metaphor of the pen as phallus and symbol of creative power, ignores critical commentary on the sensationalism that a woman's body and text are required to produce. What it does underscore is that women do not gain immediate self-recognition just by writing.

Another woman writer who is searching for the 'key' to contemporary Chinese culture is Mian Mian, born Wang Shen. In one story of a collection of inter-connected stories the narrator describes a very physical and sensual sexual moment with her lover. Afterward she writes: 'In the moment when I suddenly awoke from this experience I had a hunch that I'll someday become a woman with a lot of stories, and stories generally have a price (*daijia*)'.²⁴ Indeed, the narrator's passionate, yet dysfunctional relationships indicate that such experiences do come at a cost to her self identity. The narrator writes that after having written about the love affair in a novel she realized how much of a scoundrel the lover was and how much she was swayed by his control over her. Despite this seemingly liberating moment, when these same sexual experiences get retold, as I will later discuss, they acquire at the same time a high market value, again at the expense of the author.

Like Wei Hui's novel that cannot find a happy medium between love and sexuality, Mian Mian's stories also depict failed relationships. In 'Hong Kong lover' (*Xianggang qingren*), the narrator, Wang Xiaohua (little flower), recounts her relationships with various men, Mianhuatang (cotton candy) the Hong Kong artist, Qiyiguo (passion fruit), her friend, and her former fiancé, Tantan (heart-to-heart talker). But just as Mian Mian shows how the men undermine the narrator, she also shows how these lovers become obstacles for the woman writer. Passion Fruit loves to bring home old photographs of famous movie stars of the 1930s, such as Hudie, knowing full well that old things and images of women, even the Mona Lisa, upsets Xiaohua.²⁵ As we find out in 'Nine objects of desire' (*Jiuge mubiao yuwang*), Tantan is physically and mentally abusive to her. He beats her in public, not in private we are told casually, because he loves her (p. 34).

'Nine objects of desire' depicts the violent relationship Wang Xiaohua has with Tantan. In the story, Tantan has died in her apartment with a piece of broken glass in his neck that has her fingerprints; she has no alibi to convince the police that she was not involved. The story revolves around her recounting their relationship,

23. *Tong bing kuailiezhe*.

24. Mian Mian, 'La, La, La' ['La, la, la'], in *Yansuan qingren* [*Acid Lover*] (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 2000), pp. 87–121 at p. 92.

25. Mian Mian, 'Xianggang qingren' ('Hong Kong lover'), in *Yansuan qingren*, pp. 5–29 at p. 17.

including her suicide attempt and the revelation that she is a woman with a history of having been involved with the darker side of society. As she remembers their tumultuous relationship she does not want to hate him and proceeds to explain away his violent behavior and alcohol abuse by way of a dysfunctional childhood. She writes that the violent crimes women have committed have mostly stemmed from strong emotion directed against their men or others, but she does not delve into the possibility of her own act of violence. In the midst of her narrative she asks 'what kind of woman am I?' (p. 43). It would seem that by telling her story she will somehow be able to answer the question, but she never does. The story ends pessimistically and without resolution. The police officer asks her to tell her story again, this time using fewer adjectives (p. 55).

In 'Hong Kong lover' Tantan re-emerges and is upset about Wang Xiaohua's fictional portrayal of him in her short story 'Nine objects of desire'. He comes back into her life in order to 'kidnap' her, kicking her roommate Passion Fruit out of the apartment so that he can move in. To spite Xiaohua's Hong Kong lover, Tantan sends several faxes to him as if they were press reports from the literary supplement of 'Star News'. In the first fax he writes that the 27-year-old writer of secrets (*yinse xiaoshuo*) has been kidnapped by an old lover. Her work, entitled 'Hong Kong lover', has received critical acclaim and causes one to wonder if those 'women writers who insist on writing of their private lives really have enough strength to face their own private lives?' (p. 17). Here Mian Mian is partly playing on the gossip surrounding this successful group of young female authors that has raised them to movie star-like status and partly revealing how the writer is socially constructed through reader speculation and inference. In the second fax to her Hong Kong lover, Tantan asks who the man is that has driven the 'Iron Maiden of the Literary Field' to kill herself for him (p. 20). He sends daily faxes that analyze Wang Xiaohua's works, her tragic life, her favorite love, her happiness, if her father really is an explosion specialist and if 'his greatest work wasn't the bomb otherwise known as his daughter?' (p. 21). The absurdity of these faxes draws home the point that much ado is made about women's private lives to explain their public personas. This resonates with the conventional belief that women and intimacy are co-existent in the self-identity process. Mian Mian thus ponders, 'how could he know so much about me?' (p. 21).

In a final fax that she herself edits, Xiaohua creates an interview between a reporter and herself. The reporter insists on knowing her relationship to her Hong Kong lover because it has become a 'public concern' and readers want to know the 'truth' (p. 24). She responds by declaring that she has become a public persona not because she is a writer, but because she is a 'modern woman' (*modeng nüxing*) and she cannot stand it. She finds 'modern' women to be very traditional and does her utmost to break away from those unprogressive elements. People call her a 'rolling stone' (*yaogun*) but tattoos, homosexuality, and drugs don't make her a rocker. When the reporter replies that such accusations have come out of her own mouth, she replies that this is a media generation. She admits to being inexperienced and to wanting to be famous. She also accuses others of twisting her words and stories as well as 'smearing one's secretions' all over her works (p. 24). Xiaohua appears to be angry that both the writer and the critics are responsible for her popularity.

The story ends with Tantan finally releasing her and she moves out from Passion Fruit's apartment to live on her own in order to take up writing again. She still longs for love and to be with her Hong Kong lover even though he has virtually disappeared from her life.

'La, La, La' begins with the protagonist losing her virginity to a stranger who she later falls in love with and almost marries. Their world is colored by violence, narcotics, and prostitution in the Special Economic region of Shenzhen (southern China) in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Her lover, Saining, is a rock singer and returning overseas Chinese who introduces her to alcohol and drugs, to which she soon becomes addicted. The story recounts how despite his physical abuse and infidelity, she sees a commonality between them that binds them together. But this bind does not preclude her from attempting to commit suicide. Mian Mian demonstrates in 'La, La, La' that the cultural context that created the 'weak woman' yearning for love has played an important role in valorizing women's self-sacrificing behavior. The protagonist writes after their separation:

From my perspective, love is a male creation. I've always thought that I was a woman who would shamelessly die for a man. Moreover, because of this I thought I was strong and mighty. In a man's world, I've been a weak woman for a long time, and that's how I have needed love ... My inner world is so confined and intense that I always thought that was beautiful. After a narrow escape from danger, I have a response. I almost believe I am a very unlovable woman. What I am most certain of is that really weak women have already been wiped out (p. 116).

In 'La, La, La', Mian Mian highlights the ambiguity of being a woman who seeks to understand herself as a woman and her relationships either through searching for love or the act of writing. At the conclusion of the story she writes: 'I am naturally sensitive, but am not intelligent. I am a natural rebel, but I am not strong. I think that's my problem. I use the body to inspect men and my skin to write. I have come to realize that this cannot completely liberate me' (p. 20). Mian Mian does appear to be conscious that her female author protagonists sometimes undermine their own possibilities for liberation.

'La, La, La' is the shorter version of what became her novel *Tang (Candy)* that was banned along with Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby* in May 2000. Mian Mian admits that she wrote 'La, La, La' with the intention of becoming famous.²⁶ In the preface to *Candy*, Mian Mian writes that the novel is a culmination of all the fears and garbage that she has swallowed and has turned into candy. She writes that she did this because that is why readers love her.²⁷ Both *Shanghai Baby* and *Candy* contain sex scenes but none as racy as, for instance, male author Jia Pingwa's *Feidu* (abandoned city).²⁸ Beyond sex, the writings of these two women address broader

26. Mian Mian, *Guanyu 'feichang Mian Mian' [Regarding 'exceptional Mian Mian']*, [online], from 'Wode yuedu pindao shouye' ['The first page of my reading channel'] sponsored by dangdang.com [cited 28 August 2001]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.dangdang.com/news/news/mianmian.asp>.

27. Mian Mian, *Tang [Candy]* (Taipei: Shengzhi, 2000).

28. See Zha Jianying's discussion of Jia Pingwa's book and the sensation it caused in *China Pop: How Soap Operas, Tabloids, and Bestsellers are Transforming a Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1995). She relates how the market capitalized on the possibility of the banning of Jia's book, which subsequently took place a year after the book's publication and long after its novelty had worn off. A discussion of 'popularized' literature by male and female 'serious' authors is beyond the scope of this paper.

issues. While Wei Hui's novel revolves around the material life of young bourgeois urbanites in post-colonial Shanghai, Mian Mian's stories move between Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen. Her stories discuss the rise of drug use and the reality of AIDS amid China's rapid economic development. More so than Wei Hui, it would appear that Mian Mian is aware that the body/text connection, while a useful social tool of self-identification has its limitations. Women writers cannot act solely by way of their sexuality.

New women of the 1990s

Literary critics have noted that the 'fashionable' women writers of the 1990s are 'not forgetting to let their public know that they are women, that they are in the prime of their youth, that their beauty would "shut out the moon and put the flowers to shame", that they have a free and liberal concept of sex, that their sexual desire is vigorous, that their lovers are empty-headed, and love sex, drugs, and rock and roll ...'.²⁹ These women writers are portrayed as being unabashed about their sexuality and act seemingly independent of their reading public. But closer analysis will underscore that much of the sensationalism that these writers have supposedly caused takes its impetus from critics, publishers, and the market who have named the phenomenon that these women participate in, namely their designation as 'new, new generation', and 'fashionable women writers'. It will help here to take a moment to discuss briefly how such a terminology fits into the literary context of twentieth-century China.

The new women writers of contemporary China are very much like the 'New Woman' or 'Modern Girl' writers of the 1920s and 1930s, so designated because they left the boudoirs of their female predecessors to walk the streets as urban educated youth, and who were at once the models for a progressive China that sought to leave its feudal roots behind, as well as the harlots of an urban society that had overdosed on Western decadence. As Zhang Yingjin has argued elsewhere, the 'New Woman' of early twentieth-century China came to signify a change in traditional Chinese cultural values and was seen as 'a new subject of potential social change' that also operated as a disruptive force in society.³⁰ The new woman writer has again re-emerged in contemporary China as a force of social and cultural change. As in the past, the new woman of today is both noted for challenging the boundaries of women's social roles and at the same time criticized for it. What makes her a 'bad girl' is how her use of the pen signifies a shift from letting herself be represented by male intellectuals. What is rebellious about her is that she directs the composition of her literary world. I do not mean to suggest that a woman who writes automatically subverts the patriarchy. What is 'rebellious' about her work is its shift of cultural assumptions about gender relations by seeking to expand definitions of the word 'woman'.³¹ The New Woman both then and now

29. Wen Bo, 'Guanyu "qishi niandaiyihou" de pingshuo', p. 59.

30. Zhang Yingjin, 'Engendering Chinese filmic discourse of the 1930s: configurations of modern women in Shanghai in three silent films', *positions* 2(3), (Winter 1994), pp. 603-628 at p. 605.

31. Tani E. Barlow, 'Politics and protocols of *Funiu*: (un)making national woman', in Christina Gilmartin *et al.*, eds, *Engendering China. Woman, Culture and the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 339-359.

is presented as an independent-minded, sexualized being who is challenging the social norms with just the right amount of pressure. Problems arise only when this woman exerts more pressure than society is ready to allow. In this instance, Wei Hui and Mian Mian write about taboo subjects such as AIDS, drug addiction, casual sex, and prostitution, in addition to making manifest a female sexual autonomy. Their writings have been charged with being vulgar and criticized for dwelling on the more unruly side of contemporary Chinese culture. Wei Hui cites the reasons for the book banning were that her book was too decadent, a bad influence on youth, and filled with too much sexual description.³² But in light of the sexual excess that is readily available in contemporary Chinese urban culture, these reasons for the banning do not appear to be overwhelmingly justified. These texts must strike at the heart of a larger, less articulated, cultural crisis.

The 'New Woman' of the 1990s, like the 'New Woman' of the 1930s, is a central figure in an imaginary that projects China as modernizing and as unique in cultural character. In the emergence of a post-socialist gendered literature since the 1980s gender continues to be a part of China's national imaginary and women's writing takes on specific values in literary discourse. The project to define woman and her relationship to literature is complicated by the fact that sexuality, virtually erased from social discourse during the height of socialism in China, is now evoked by both men and women as a way to recover a selfhood.³³ As in the early twentieth-century, gender assists in the construction of a self identity that plays up individual difference as opposed to a collective so prevalent under socialism.

In light of China's insertion in a global economy, a nostalgia has befallen the 1990s whereby China invokes its halcyon days of the 1930s as a way to mark a time when China was closest to a Western modern ideal and to 'fabricate an Oriental mythology'.³⁴ This is evident in the renewed interest in the 'New Woman', the reissue of journals, photographs, and films from this era, as well as newer films based on this time period.³⁵ Such an invocation reassures ones ties to a national past as well as to a global culture that seeks entertainment in an exotic Other. In addition, there is renewed interest in the *qipao* (a stylized dress for women that incorporates Chinese and Western fashion) and 'New Woman' paraphernalia from posters to coffee coasters that hark back to this time and can be found on the market for Chinese and foreign consumption. Such a fadish nostalgia is not only the means by which the Chinese people become accustomed to rapid urbanization and economic advancement, it is also China's ticket to the world market. In its

32. Wei Hui, *Shanghai Writer Challenging Stereotypes* [online] ABC Online. (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) 7.30 Report Transcript 30 July 2001 [cited 26 March 2002]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/s337692.htm>.

33. Ching-kiu Stephen Chan, 'Split China, or, the historical/imaginary: toward a theory of the displacement of subjectivity at the margins of modernity', in Liu Kang and Xiaobing Tang, eds, *Politics, Ideology, and Literary Discourse in Modern China* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 70–101; Lu Tonglin, ed., *Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature and Society* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993); Zhong Xueping, *Masculinity Besieged?: Issues of Modernity and Male Subjectivity in Chinese Literature of the Late Twentieth Century* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000).

34. Dai Jinhua, 'Imagined nostalgia', *boundary 2* 24(3), (Fall 1997), pp. 143–161 at p. 145.

35. For instance, Stanley Kwan's *Yan zhi kou* (Rouge, 1987), Zhang Yimou's *Yao a yao, yao dao waipo qiao* (Shanghai triad, 1995).

contemporary setting, the unruliness of the 'New Woman' of the 1930s is tamed. Not unproblematically, Wei Hui's avowed interest in the writings of Zhang Ailing, and her pride in wearing a *qipao* of her own design attest to the writer's interest in recalling this time period. In recent years, it is not just the 'New Woman' but also women's relationship to literature that has been re-invoked to recast the composition of a national identity in the literary field.

Renowned male critic and writer, Wang Meng is conscious that women writers of the 1980s and 1990s have captivated the interest and attention of a readership both within China and abroad. In the preface to the collection of women's writings that he edited he attempts to capture why women have received so much attention. His discussion of them as a collective seems to reveal the shift in emphasis from a masculinized asexual culture of the Cultural Revolution to the flourishing of female sexuality and the personal lives of individuals. His reaction reveals how the presence of female sexuality that has emerged in post-Cultural Revolution China has upset the male-dominated cultural order.

I have half-jokingly suggested that they [women writers] set up a women writer's association so that we men can avoid running into them. We cannot write better than them. They give one in the literary circle the same sensation as in a sports match; both give the impression of yin rising over yang (*yinsheng yangshuai*).³⁶

More so than the feared competition for attention that women writers bring to the literary field in the 1990s, Wang Meng's sentiment underscores a deep-rooted belief that women writers are capable of writing only in one genre: that of 'woman's literature'. To him, such a literature is personal, emotional, often unrestrained, likely to be rebellious, and devoid of serious (rational) thought or discussion. His sentiments reflect early twentieth-century notions of women as victims of oppression and a contemporary desire to define the woman writer's identity in a rapidly changing cultural context in a similar vein. By virtue of being women, he continues, their works voice the same cry of pain and humiliation. Wang excuses their occasional indiscretions or outbursts as responses to the physical and mental effects of social oppression, and denies the possibility of an agency that actively seeks to thwart such cultural conditions. Thus, women's cries are socially acceptable only if they remain within the culturally accepted fora. Or in other words, women's writings are read only within this framework and what does not fit into the framework gets ignored.

Even though readers of contemporary Chinese women writers say they look back to women writers of the 1920s and 1930s for inspiration and encouragement, it appears that the publishing world is doing its part to create such a literary tradition. To demonstrate China's commitment to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, in Beijing 1995, China supported the publication of several books by and about women.³⁷ Among them were several literary series on women's

36. Wang Meng, 'Preface', in Chi Li, *Lüshui changliu* [*Green Waters Flow Endlessly*], edited by Wang Meng, Hong yingsu congshu [Red poppy series] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaohu chubanshe, 1995), pp. 1–7 at pp. 1–2.

37. Zhang Jingyuan notes that central government publishers, academic publishers, and local and provincial presses all increased production of books by and about women: 'Breaking open: Chinese women's writing in the late 1980s and 1990s', in Pang-yuan Chi and David Wang, eds, *Chinese Literature in the Second Half of a Modern Century*

literature, such as *Red Poppy Series* (*Hong yingsu congshu*), *Their [feminine] Literature Series* (*Tamen wenxue congshu*), *Red Chili Series* (*Hong lajiao*), *Contemporary Women's Literature Series* (*Dangdai nüxing wenxue shuxi*), and series on women's essays, such as *20th Century Cathay Woman's Literature Classical Series* (*Ershi shiji huaxia nüxing wenxue jingdian wenku*), *The Best Essays by Chinese Women Writers* (*Zhongguo nüzuojia sanwen jingpin*), and *The Collected Beautiful Writings of Talented Women from the Republican Era* (*Minguo cainü meiwenji*). Because the Chinese literary and commercial markets are revisiting the past, these literary series are not limited to contemporary women writers alone.³⁸ The series has the effect of homogenizing twentieth-century women's literature as archetype of a new and progressive generation. *Their [feminine] Literature Series* includes in each book a short poem that reduces the nature of being a woman to that of mother, nurturer, and muse.

They [feminine] are they. We are we. We will never be like them.
 Moreover, without them, there would be no us.
 It is they who nurture the human race.
 It is they who developed civilization.
 Without them, the world would be incomplete.
 Without them, literature would be crippled.
 Their existence makes the world complete.
 Their existence makes literature fresh and vibrant.
 In the face of tradition, they are the worst of women.
 In the face of the future, they are the best of women.
 Having them in this world, we can surpass history.
 Having them in this world, we can win over tomorrow.
 Therefore, I love them. We love them.
 Therefore, 'Their [feminine] Literature Series' was imagined.
 Chinese women's literature from this day forward progresses towards new glory.
 Chinese women writers from this day forward are climbing literature's peaks.
 They will give us:
 Another piece of blue sky and white clouds,
 Another rotation of the bright moon and morning sun,
 Another pair of eyes,
 Another home.
 Come,
 Us and them.³⁹

The packaging of women writers in these literary series helps augment the sensation that these women are supposedly causing in the literary field. Despite granting women a public forum for their writings, this book series, among others, assumes common characteristics of womanliness inherent in all women writers,

Footnote 37 continued

(Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 2000), pp. 161–179 at p. 162. Zhang also quotes from literary researcher and writer Xu Kun who notes that during this time everyone 'gao funü' ('worked on women' or 'did women'), which carried both intellectual research and sexual undertones (p. 177).

38. *Ibid.*, p. 163; Dai Jinhua, 'Rewriting Chinese women: gender production and cultural space in the eighties and nineties', in Mayfair Yang, *Spaces of Their Own*, pp. 191–206 at p. 204.

39. Cheng Fangzhi, 'Preface', in Lin Bai, *Huilang zhiqi* [*The Chair in the Winding Corridor*], edited by Hang Xiaogang. *Tamen wenxue congshu* (Their literature series) (Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe, 1995), p. 1.

regardless of the literary content of their works. Moreover, almost all of these series incorporate symbolic images of femininity, flowers, flower vases, jewelry, lace, women's faces, etc., on their book covers, thus reinforcing oversimplified ideologies of femaleness.

As Mayfair Yang points out, 'the effect of making woman palpably visible is to make viewers identify with the subject-position of the male eye. In this way, male subjectivity and its power are made invisible ... but this invisibility is not based on an erasure or blurring of genders but depends on the hypervisibility of the female image'.⁴⁰ An example of this is in how Sanlian Publishers packaged Mian Mian's *Acid Lover*. Every page of the book is littered with provocative partial views of women's bodies, eyes that look at the reader head-on, and feminine accoutrements, such as lipstick, high heels, a purse, and flowers. An image of a bed appears on the same page where Wang Xiaohua ponders her fate in a prison holding cell while she awaits the verdict on if she is to be charged with Tantan's death.

As is evident with the multiple messages that the above-mentioned publications accord women writers, the role of the modern woman writer is complex. She must possess the innate characteristics of a cultural tradition that assumes a specific kind of femininity. Her writing must be representative of this tradition as it gets marketed at home and abroad yet her act of writing—a rational endeavor for self-discovery—is already outside the confines of traditional female roles. While the contemporary market thrives on the tension between female domesticity and rebellion, one must wonder how capable women writers are of not getting caught up in their own sensationalism. As Mian Mian writes in 'La, La, La': 'When writing I hoped to find rationality, but now the only thing I can confirm is that this time, writing made me into an industrious woman. Damn. Are we really out of control for the sake of freedom or is our freedom itself uncontrollable' (p. 121)?

In regard to women's increased visibility, writer and critic Xu Kun recognizes the contradiction of a political difference located in an essential femaleness. At first glance she praises the book series that generated a space for women writers in the literary field, but on second glance, she realizes that state control over gender has been taken over by the market. She recognizes that the largely male editors and publishers have the ultimate say in where a woman's text gets printed, how it is packaged and ultimately marketed.⁴¹ She notes how the standards for women writers of the 1980s were based on their ability to 'blend' genders, thus allowing them to masquerade as men, whereas 1990s literature lets them masquerade as women.⁴² What is distinctive about this 'new, new generation' is that they have at their disposal a multiplicity of strategies to be a woman. She writes that unlike their predecessors, these women do not need to be the legendary female warrior Mu Lan, and they are free to write what they want without hindrance (p. 102). Yet as much as Xu Kun believes these women to be daring and gifted, even her discussion of

40. Mayfair Yang, 'Introduction', p. 50.

41. Xu Kun, 'Congci yuelai yue mingliang' ['Brighter and brighter from now on'], *Beijing Wenxue* [Beijing Literature] 11, (1995).

42. Xu Kun, 'Zhou Jieru: xiaoyaomen de chengshi shenghua yu jianju shidai' ['Zhou Jieru: the urban life of little witches and the age of cocoons'], in *Xingqing nannü: Xu Kun zuopin jinghua* [The Temperament of Men and Women: The Best Works of Xu Kun] (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2001), pp. 100–103 at p. 100.

women writers of this generation cannot help but consider them as a collective group in a way that insists that they write similarly. She conceives of women as naturally having compassion and understanding for one another; and as wanting the same things so that none of them can concentrate on anything else but attaining this shared goal of the power over 'our' selves.⁴³

Xu Kun, like other literary critics, is fascinated by this young group of writers. She and others have filled the pages of literary magazines trying to explain this phenomenon without thinking that it is perhaps they who are contributing to the sensation. At least Xu Kun questions what it really means to write as a woman: 'After all, what is the real feminine way of thinking, the evolution of feminine desires, and ways of expression ...?' (p. 391). She insists that the young women writers of the 1970s generation defy patriarchy and male criticism (p. 392), and that they form part of a collective that Xu Kun herself joins only on the sidelines since she herself has chosen a rational, 'boring' literary style over resilience and tenacity.⁴⁴ Perhaps unwittingly Xu Kun's understanding of women using their 'limbs and skin' to write their sincere experiences in unrestrained style is reminiscent of the similar sentiments expressed in the 1930s. This resonance brings me to question whether these women writers and critics are merely perpetuating the same old stereotypes.

In the forward to *Candy*, Mian Mian adamantly states that she is nobody's spokesperson. Moreover, the terms 'new, new generation' and '70s generation' are made up by the literary field and her novel has been vulgarized and commercialized by the media.⁴⁵ Perhaps as if to combat this mis-appropriation, Mian Mian has created a kind of manifesto with '*Feichang Mian Mian*' (exceptional Mian Mian), wherein she outlines four points for literary creativity. This manifesto has found a place on the Web where readers can send her their creative material as long as it has not been previously published in a journal and the author must not have received a college degree in Chinese literature. Moreover, the work must be written from real life experiences as long as they are experiences of someone who has not yet reached 30 years of age and must have emerged from an unimaginable experience of having lost one's footing.⁴⁶ Mian Mian posts both the creative works and her critique of them on the Web. It is as if she has become the commander of the underdog writers, and her restrictions for literary production indicates that she privileges an uneducated youth culture. Unlike in the publishing industry and its list of young, up-and-coming writers, is this Internet sector one over which she in turn has ultimate control?

The economy of exposure

Like others of their generation, Wei Hui and Mian Mian are writing at a time of transition. China's economic reforms and increased interaction with the rest of the world have all made an impact on how Chinese see themselves and the world. The

43. Xu Kun, 'Meimei de shiji' ['The century of pretty eyebrows'], in *Xingqing nannü*, pp. 390–392 at p. 392.

44. Xu Kun, 'Yichang santan' ['One singing and three sighs (a deeply touching literary work)'], in *Xingqing nannü*, pp. 334–340 at p. 335.

45. Mian Mian, *Tang*, p. ii.

46. Mian Mian, *Feichang Mian Mian*.

dominant cultural narrative has shifted from the countryside to the city, from the peasant core of Chinese national identity to the consumer malls in cosmopolitan spaces. This shift reveals how Chinese national identity is bound to the global economy and Western visions of modernity. Gender differentiation makes visible China's emergence from a closed socialist society to a consumerist culture that commodifies 'the bodies, sexualities, and images of women'.⁴⁷

Part of the sensationalism that lies behind these women writers is how their writings, more so than those of previous generations of female writing professionals, are about exposure. They reveal how young women think, including their desires and their frustrations, no matter how trivial or how serious. This kind of exposure does have an important political dimension in that Chinese women of the 1990s are finally able to create a public space for themselves, and even have a hand in the crafting of their public personae. But, in an equally political vein, such exposure goes hand in hand with attempts to boost the economy by targeting young women as its largest consumer base.

Books on women's sexuality, newspaper columns and book series on the inner turmoils and desires of everyday women, have captured the imagination of men and women hungry to find out about the private lives of women, despite occasional censorship. Such books often sell out quickly.⁴⁸ But whereas one is now able to read about 'real' lives and to discover the pitfalls and idiosyncrasies of unwanted pregnancies, divorces, extramarital affairs, and domestic abuse in everyday life, conservatives in the Chinese government disapprove of giving press to the darker side of society. What they do not disapprove of are sexually provocative book covers revealing images of women's naked bodies, a mise-en-scene of a wild and drunken evening, pretty female faces, or flowers (more benign but equally symbolic of 'woman'). The female ideal is dolled-up for the hungry gaze of the public, thus rendering women objects of voyeurism. The 1930s writer Ding Ling, who once refused to publish her work in just such a publication series on 'New Woman' writers and claimed that '[she] sell[s] texts, not the word "woman"', finds herself now packaged with contemporary women writers under the cover of images of a bikini clad body and the head of a female cyborg.⁴⁹

Academic and critic Dai Jinhua notes how the 1990s has revealed the 'natural' affinity of 'woman' to commerce.⁵⁰ Works that are readily consumed in the literary market are those that write against taboos of former days. Those works that are serious or 'pure' are considered to be unmarketable.⁵¹ Thus for Dai, the greatest danger facing women writers in contemporary China is commercialization. The danger lies in a consumer-driven market that demands that the notion of 'woman'

47. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, 'From gender erasure to gender difference: state feminism, consumer sexuality, and women's public sphere in China', in *Spaces of Their Own*, pp. 35–67 at p. 51.

48. For example, see An Dun, *Dongci An Dun [The verb An Dun]* (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 1999).

49. Ding Ling, 'Xiegei nüqingnian zhuzhe' ['Written for young women writers'], in *Ding Ling lun chuangzuo [Ding Ling Discusses Literary Creativity]* (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1989), pp. 415–427; Ding Ling *et al.*, *Guiwen [Ghost Kiss]*, edited by Lan Dizhi and Xiao Qing (Shenyang: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe, 1993).

50. Dai Jinhua, 'Qiyu yu tuwei: jiushi niandai de nüxing wenhua yu nüxing xiezuo' ['Strange encounter and breakthrough: woman's culture and woman's writing in the nineties'], in Dai Jinhua, ed., *Shijizhimen: dangdai nüxing xiaoshuo jingpin [The Door to the Century: Selected Contemporary Women's Novels]* (Beijing: shehui kexue wenzhai chubanshe, 2000), pp. 1–27 at p. 7.

51. *Ibid.*

suits the needs of merchants, advertising firms, and cultural arbiters. While contemporary women writers are writing with relatively greater independence from state and literary establishment demands, and while they may no longer need to worry if they have the 'correct social and political perspective', are 'too narrow-minded' or 'too feminine',⁵² they are still beholden to the editors and publishers that sell their books. Even then, no matter what the content of their writings, sexy book covers draw potential buyers to the bookstands, while the exploration of female psychological vicissitudes attract new and returning readers.

Female sexuality plays an important part in the cultural recapturing of a masculine identity in the post-Mao era whereby the Chinese male enacts the 'transnational fantasy' of competing successfully for global capital and women.⁵³ What is in operation here is what L.H.M. Ling considers to be the upwardly mobile 'hypermasculinity' of contemporary China, whose capital intensive drives are pitted against a hyperfeminized position.⁵⁴ The rhetoric of the market, Ling argues, borrows from the state, whereby hypermasculinity takes 'revenge against the West's emasculating imperialism' (p. 283). For Ling, hypermasculinity 'builds on a colonial legacy of racialized, sexualized production and consumption' (p. 285). Female sexuality in contemporary China is tamed by either domestication or by exploitation. Examples of which are in the slate of commercials that depict women as bourgeois housewives and mothers, or in the reemergence of the female nude in art magazines and the growing number of scantily clad Asian females on billboards selling lingerie.

To maintain the appearance of women's control over the reproduction of their sexuality, women are represented as sexually and economically autonomous. The market and culture on the whole have been successful in harnessing women's agency toward the good of the nation. Young women have become the leaders of national salvation through their purchases of cosmetics, clothing, and all the latest fashion, as have married women who clean the house for the health of their husbands and sons. The emerging bourgeoisie maintain the economy of China's countless new shopping centers.⁵⁵ And along with this consumer culture, prostitution and soft porn have re-emerged. We can see the daily fashion shows outside department stores and in restaurants, and women can be had for the right price in the nightclubs. These women are fully sexualized. But how much are they in control of it?

Mian Mian writes perceptively on how China's newly consumerist culture drives the shaping of a female identity. In 'My Brand-Name Life' she questions the reader if s/he would like her if she wore brand names, such as Gucci, Moschino, or Prada.⁵⁶ She wonders whether the reader would like her novels less if she wore

52. Zhang Jingyuan, 'Breaking open', p. 163.

53. Sheldon H. Lu, 'Soap opera in China: the transnational politics of visibility, sexuality, and masculinity', *Cinema Journal* 40(1), (Fall 2000), pp. 25-47 at p. 31.

54. L.H.M. Ling, 'Sex machine: global hypermasculinity and images of the Asian woman in modernity', *positions* 7(2), (1999), pp. 277-306.

55. The rhetoric of women as saviors of the economy is not limited to China alone. This notion is currently prevalent in the US as it encourages women to consume as part of their 'patriotic duty' during wartime and economic recession.

56. Mian Mian, *Wo de mingpai shenghuo* [online], [cited on 12 June 2001]. Muzi.com. Available from World Wide Web: < <http://www.shuwu.com/ar/fanti/111251.shtml> > .

someone else's name. She also notes how wearing such brand names changes her perception of herself. She resists new Chinese bourgeois consumerist practices, and in turn, complicity in women's role as the ultimate consumers. She defiantly states that 'Mian Mian is my name brand'. Mian Mian insists on her own self-fashioning and self-branding, whereas Wei Hui appears to revel in it uncritically. In *Shanghai Baby*, CoCo exclaims: 'whenever I'm feeling down, like other women my age, I go to Huating Road, stroll from one end to the other, and buy up a storm' (p. 89). Although Mian Mian is conscious of consumerism, she appears as one more product on the shelf. Her name brand rings of an air of exclusivity that is found in haut couture boutiques, not the department stores.

So why should the sensationalism of Wei Hui's and Mian Mian's writings be so problematic as to elicit a ban on their novels *Shanghai Baby* and *Candy*? Isn't Wei Hui the embodiment of the sex kitten that Chinese consumers have come to take for granted? Dare we suggest that Mian Mian is a modern female knight-errant whose autonomy projects the air of social freedom and threatens to ignore any attempt to control her? Both Wei Hui and Mian Mian have transgressed social norms in their writings. The criticism of these two writers that appear in countless literary discussions as well as the seemingly ubiquitous presence of the 1990s New Woman attest to the fact that this young generation of women is causing a social stir. The controversy lies in the fact that they challenge the power of male intellectual elite and the government over the representation of the female by the very fact that these women seem to be so uncontrollable.

In short, both Wei Hui and Mian Mian are following a long tradition of self-fashioning of the woman writer that began long before the twentieth century, but that continues to be problematic. These two women join a group of women writers who have taken up the pen to play with social conventions and to refashion constantly their images. More so than this, these writers have recognized that the paratexts represent them, just as much as their own literary attempts do. What Wei Hui and Mian Mian have done is to hyperactivate their social persona, to manipulate the self-image and the fetishization of the woman writer. Not only do Wei Hui and Mian Mian join in with other female writers to blur the line between the authorial and fictional self they manipulate the line in a very sophisticated fashion. While the world may still be debating if Ding Ling is Miss Sophie, Wei Hui and Mian Mian take the debate one step further by showing that the author, too, is a fictional creation with social, political, and economic performative functions. Such a play, I would argue, requires an egoism that can outwit both critical and commercial forces. Such forces thrive on gossip and the spectacle of 'woman'. Instead of obediently wearing the humiliating old shoes of female sexuality, they flaunt female desire. In refusing to withdraw from the world as hapless victims of gender inequality, as in the neurasthenics of the May Fourth Era or the overworked middle-aged women of the 1970s, they revel in the unconventional.⁵⁷ In so doing, their writings are at the limits of acceptable Chinese social womanhood. Their decadence and irreverence for social convention mark them as rebels who counteract the desires of political and market economies.

57. Zhu Hong, 'Women, illness, and hospitalization: images of women in contemporary Chinese fiction', in Gilmartin et al., *Engendering China*, pp. 318–338.

Their own sexuality and their depictions of sexually active young female protagonists are overturning decades of repression of female sexuality. By flooding the literary field with overt signs of female sexuality they are challenging social and political mores. Their texts are the spaces where women's issues and other contemporary social issues get addressed outside the confines of bureaucratic-speak. One can argue that the 'sexual revolution' these writers have started has indeed shaken the nation.

Yet as much as Wei Hui and Mian Mian push the limits of socially acceptable 'womanliness' they are complicit with the social and commercial forces that have defined them. Wei Hui and Mian Mian are capitalizing on the increasing global economy to promote themselves and their works, and to reveal just how gender-driven the market is. Wei Hui enjoys touring to promote her works and appears to relish in the sensation that her writings have caused.⁵⁸ Mian Mian's forays into film making and organizing dance parties serves a growing consumerist, apolitical Chinese youth. They both belong to a generation that does not combat hegemony in any radical, subversive way, but operates within its very mechanizations in order to manipulate it.

It is evident that both these writers are aware of the impact they have on their readers, yet they are equally aware of how they cannot control their readers' reception of them. What one should be critical of is how they appear to be resigned to this lack of control. These writers may have sparked a sexual revolution, but are they capable of sustaining it much less leading it? Mian Mian writes that 'about 60 per cent of those who read my books should not be reading them, because they read without understanding. For instance, my books portray drug-taking as a bad thing. Yet, many people think that taking drugs is cool'.⁵⁹ At the same time, she is quoted elsewhere as saying that she does not care how her works are printed. Mian Mian writes about the publishers who want to change her words: 'They all want to pay me, to package and market me. But I don't trust them. As it is, I can argue or walk away. Once I have their cash, they can change whatever they want'.⁶⁰ While Mian Mian recognizes how influential her texts can be, she appears to relinquish all insights for profit.

Both writers are very popular among young female readers and have even developed a following outside of China. The autonomy they project removes them from the grasp of cultural arbiters, that is critics and censors, but one wonders about their responsibility to anyone but themselves. Both *play* with female essentialisms but refuse to be contained within the hitherto confines of a masculine constructed feminine space. Instead, cyberspace and the Internet, aside from book-signing engagements abroad, are where they are broadening, and perhaps

58. Terry McCarthy, *Asia Buzz: Thought Police Sex and Drugs Irk China's Cultural Mandarins* [online] Time Asia, (12 April 2000) [cited 29 November 2001]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.time.com/time/asia/asiabuzz/2000/04/12/>; Craig S. Smith, 'Sex, lust, drugs: her novel's too much for China', *The New York Times*, (11 May 2000).

59. Mary Kwang, *Mian Mian* [online], [Singapore] The Straits Times Interactive, December 2000 [cited 16 June 2001]. Available from World Wide Web: < <http://straitstimes.asia1.com.sg/mnt/html/women/archive/featured8.html> >.

60. Gary Jones, *Mian Mian: Chronicler of China's Chemical Generation* [online], in [Beijing: China]: Beijing Scene 6(5), (12–18 November 1999) [cited 16 June 2001]. Available from World Wide Web: < <http://beijingscene.com/v06i005/feature/feature.html> >.

even diffusing, or counteracting the hypermasculine drive of contemporary Chinese society; but cyberspace and the international market are not free from gendered and racialized notions.

The problem that arises from these two very outspoken and free-spirited personalities is that it is difficult for them not to get caught up in the rhetoric of the female qualities that they supposedly condemn, refashion, and ultimately mimic. The feud between Wei Hui and Mian Mian over Wei Hui's purported plagiarism of Mian Mian's works adds excitement to two celebrities. Each claims to be authentic, to be the original creator of the sensation they have caused, and each is critical that the other is too sexually explicit and not literary enough.⁶¹ One can see this dispute as a bickering that undermines their credibility as writers. What is more, they lack a more critical observation of what it means socially and politically to be a woman writer in contemporary China, preferring to participate in a performance that fuels their contradictory identities. After all, their texts are inseparable from the social and cultural conventions that construct a female identity. Certainly the market has capitalized on this feud, even going so far as to reprint their two banned books in one single volume for consumption on the black market in China.⁶² The feud has gained popularity in Taiwan and abroad. For the public, such a dispute is a part of the spectacle that these writers have already created. Not only do they run the risk of identifying with the commercialism that surrounds their writings, but their 'subversive' project overlooks a pervasive cultural conservatism that does not seek to challenge reality. Such conservatism is pro-nationalist, anti-Western in sentiment, and pro-Asian in values.⁶³ As such, these values reinforce traditional notions of female sexuality. One wonders with this trend if these young women writers have the force to counter such conservatism.

Yet the question remains, where does one go from here? Can these authors continue to shock their readers without duplicating themselves to the point of burn out? Can they write beyond the narrow notions of gender that have thus far resulted in self-destruction? These are the questions that have arisen from both cultural and feminist appropriation of a female sexuality in contemporary China. What I want to ask here is how the public consumption of female sexuality assists in the liberation of the woman writer? Intellectual and Chinese feminist Li Xiaojiang questions the pressures put on women in the last decades, arguing that women's social and economic issues have been put aside in the wake of economic reform.⁶⁴ While women's voices in contemporary China are writing against the socialist state-sponsored version of women's liberation, where does the project stand today? Have women writers been co-opted by publishing dynamics that prefer to market the tribulations of bourgeois women instead of facing the realities that economic

61. Mary Kwang, *Mian Mian* [online]; *Zhou Wei Hui* [online]. [Singapore]: Straits Times Interactive. Available from World Wide Web: < <http://straitstimes.asia1.com.sg/women/story/0,1870,62458,00.html?> > . Also Available in *ST Life!* (August 2001).

62. The distinction between a market that publishes for a specific audience and for profit and the secondary markets that are more singularly profit-driven cannot be discussed here.

63. Ben Xu, 'Contesting memory for intellectual self-positioning: the 1990s' new cultural conservatism in China', *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 11(1), (Spring 1999), pp. 157–192 at p. 166.

64. Li Xiaojiang, 'Economic reform and the awakening of Chinese women's collective consciousness', in Gilmartin *et al.*, *Engendering China*, pp. 360–382.

reform is hurting both educated and uneducated women? Women are often the first to be laid off from defunct state-owned enterprises or newly acquired foreign businesses, and few women are participating in political life. Moreover, trafficking in women, domestic abuse, and female suicide rates are on the rise. While women's writings are demanding new cultural and physical spaces by 'break[ing] out of the male elites' pattern of grand narrative and national allegory to describe the everyday life of women in an undecorated style' they are doing so at the expense of a 'new cultural exploitation'.⁶⁵

The seduction of 'woman' and woman as seduction in the media and market spheres undermines women's important roles in the political and social economy. Critics and publishers conceive of the value of women writers in contemporary Chinese society in limited terms. In revealing their ambivalence about their roles as women, women writers themselves relinquish the power they have as writers to create an alternative to the oversimplification of sexuality and self-determination in contemporary Chinese society. For now, female sexuality continues to be a disruptive force in Chinese society and the extent to which women writers activate or ignore this force results in contradictory paths toward female agency.

65. Dai Jinhua, *Rewriting Chinese Women*, pp. 203–204.

