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Sex and the City

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Lena Scheen

Mian Mian and Wei Hui are prominent among writers of the 'Post-70' generation: those born after 1970, who witnessed socialism's metamorphosis into a market economy and society's embrace of commercialisation and consumerism. As Mian Mian remarked: 'When I was young there was absolutely nothing to do in Shanghai, there were no pubs or discos. On my seventeenth birthday I went to Shenzhen where I lived a rough life. After five years I came back to Shanghai and the city had totally changed, that's when I started to write'.¹ While Shenzhen became a Special Economic Zone in 1980, Shanghai obtained that coveted status only in 1990. Over the next decade the city witnessed an explosion of destruction and renewal, becoming a landscape of dusty trenches, rising cranes and skyscraper skeletons. Ian Buruma has described Shanghai's makeover as the greatest urban transformation since Haussmann rebuilt Paris in the 19th century; the city's inhabitants have had to confront a drastically changing society as well as the physical disappearance of familiar surroundings at a pace and scale unmatched in any other Chinese city.

Shanghai is Pudong

... the Orient Pearl TV Tower, Asia's tallest. Its long, long steel column pierces the sky, proof of the city's phallus worship. ... all these signs of material prosperity are aphrodisiacs the city uses to



Jiang Lidong

Mian Mian pouring beer on Wei Hui's head in a Shanghai bar; Wei Hui baring her breasts at a press conference; mutual threats on the internet – self-labelled Beauty Writers Mian Mian and Wei Hui fear no accusations in their public catfight over alleged plagiarism in turn-of-the-century Shanghai. The rivalry began after publication of their semi-autobiographical 'shock novels' portraying hedonists searching for love and self in Shenzhen and Shanghai. Plagiarism or not, Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby* and Mian Mian's *Candy* are products of their time.

intoxicate itself. They have nothing to do with us, the people who live among them. A car accident or a disease can kill us, but the city's prosperous, invincible silhouette is like a planet, in perpetual motion, eternal.

The passage is from Wei Hui's novel *Shanghai Baby*, translated by Bruce Humes, a story about the young writer Coco (after Coco Chanel), who falls in love with the impotent painter Tian Tian and the German businessman Mark. Not coincidentally, the above scene takes place on the Bund, symbol of Shanghai for over a century. On this road along the western bank of the Huangpu River, western colonial settlers built trading houses, consulates, banks and hotels – beautifully preserved Art Deco and neoclassical buildings. Just like Coco and her lover, people from all over China flock to the Bund everyday to stroll along the river and gaze at the other side: the Pudong area with its futuristic skyline, all flickering neon-lit glass and steel skyscrapers. The area was still mainly farmland until 1990, when it was officially designated to become the financial hub of new Superpower China. Remarkably, most buildings behind the ultramodern façade are still empty, making the area more of a giant mission statement than an actual business centre. The visual spectacle seems to function as an image reinforcing the city government's slogan 'Shanghai is the future' – a slogan Mian Mian ironically refers to in her novel *Panda*: 'Everyone says that Shanghai is the future. What will the future be like? The answer to that question is like this big X at the floor indicator of the elevator, the X that quickly flashes from 1 to 54'.

The protagonist in this passage is standing in the elevator of the Jin Mao (Gold Luxuriance) Tower in Pudong, the tallest building in China, its East-meets-West design signifying Shanghai's emergence as a modern global city. For Mian Mian and Wei Hui's characters, Pudong's skyscrapers represent the 'prosperity' of modernising Shanghai and at the same time the 'emptiness' of its prosperity. Or in Mian Mian's words: 'Shanghai today

is only about business, business, business, it's without culture... Shanghai is fake, Shanghai is empty, Shanghai is Pudong, you know'.

Freedom or loss of control?

Mian Mian and Wei Hui's novels reveal ambivalence towards contemporary Shanghai. The protagonists lead decadent lives of travelling, eating in expensive restaurants and shopping for designer clothing. They glorify newly-attained wealth, freedom and endless lifestyle choices, but criticise their artificiality, emptiness and destructive potential. Their characters continuously renegotiate their identity in a rapidly changing environment. As Mian Mian writes in 'I love Shanghai':

This is my hometown. For over a decade I have watched it evolve. And I have been changed by it. To me, each shift has been a soft touch, a little murmur. The city's progress has also brought with it some things that make me sad. Everything has happened so quickly, the Shanghaiines are lost, dizzy and confused – especially the young people.

Unable to cope with drastic change and sudden freedom, the characters escape into an underworld of sex, drugs and hard rock. Mian Mian's characters in particular show a predilection for violence, addiction and suicide; the main character in her collection of stories, *La La La*, remarks: 'Did we lose control of ourselves because we were seeking freedom, or was our freedom itself just a kind of loss of control?' Because of their sexually provocative stories, Mian Mian and Wei Hui are also labelled Body Writers, described by Chinese critics such as Zha Xiduo, Chen Dongfeng and Zhang Helong as 'writing with their body and thinking with their skin'. Perpetual urban change has triggered a retreat into private spaces, bathrooms and bedrooms; the body is one of the only constants one can fall back on.

While Mian Mian and Wei Hui's fiction reflects urban experience, it also feeds back into such experience. Many

of their stories are set in the Shanghai night, with characters taking taxis from nightclub to nightclub. The streets and clubs are actual places in Shanghai; some have become popular among readers. Although the novels blur the line between the 'real' and imagined Shanghai, they make use of a mythologising 'spatial rhetoric' that elides great chunks of the city and exaggerates others, transforming Shanghai into a sexualised archipelago of expatriate parties and nightspots inhabited by voracious white-collar women, artists, foreigners, and prostitutes' (Farrer 2002: 33). The explicit descriptions of sex, drugs, prostitution, AIDS and suicide prompted the government to ban *La La La, Shanghai Baby* and *Candy*. The ban increased their popularity in China and abroad, and granted them a certain cult status: Mian Mian gained fame within the urban counter-culture, while Wei Hui became a role model for Chinese youth across the country and even in Japan, where she is one of the most popular contemporary Chinese writers. According to a Chinese newspaper, a book-signing tour in Japan attracted long lines of young women and old men waiting for Wei Hui's autograph 'with tears in their eyes'. Japanese youth

also identify themselves with Wei Hui's characters' desire for social and sexual liberation. One Japanese girl was quoted in the newspaper as saying: 'After reading Wei Hui's books I could finally understand the meaning of sex, now I know it's something very complicated that can be beautiful as well as sad. I am not afraid of it anymore.'

I am like a Panda now

The Post-70s are clearly conscious of urban transformation, which contrasts with a new generation of writers, such as Han Han, Guo Jingming and Zhou Jianing labelled the 'Post-80s'. This younger group of writers grew up during the construction boom without having consciously experienced the earlier situation. As a result, they write about urban transformation from the inside. In their work the mushrooming skyscrapers and commercialising society seem a 'natural' part of the setting; the

characters behave like uncritical consumers whose lives are determined by fleeting and coincidental events and thrills. After the initial shock, the latest works of the Post-70s, too, display a softer tone and show a tendency toward adaptation. The protagonist in Wei Hui's latest novel *Marrying Buddha* still seeks sexual pleasure but also devotes herself to traditional Chinese religion and philosophy. Mian Mian's latest novel *Panda* reflects, according to *China Daily*, 'her new-found maturity after steering her life clear of drugs, booze and even sex'. The cover also includes an English title: *Panda Sex*. As Mian Mian bluntly explains: 'A panda has only sex twice a year, I'm like a panda now.' ▲

Note

1. All quotations from Mian Mian are from my interviews with her in October and November 2005. Wei Hui and Mian Mian's writings have attracted attention from Chinese critics as well as scholars of Chinese literature including Megan Ferry, Sabina Knight, Harry Kuoshu and Yue Tao. Wei Hui and Mian Mian's visit to the Amsterdam China Festival in October 2005 was sponsored by IIAS.

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