CONSUMING SECRETS:
CHINA'S NEW PRINT CULTURE
AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Introduction

The following study investigates relationships between the growth of consumer culture, the rise of a new kind of urban author, and the appearance of a new type of commercial publisher in the Deng Xiaoping–Jiang Zemin era. The essay uses fictional narratives as source material in order to gain insight into changing perceptions of print culture. Analysis traces the interplay of market forces, political pressures, and artistic expression, both in traditional print and online texts.

This analytical approach emphasizes how literary texts perceive and reflect on their changing world. I argue that the new works of fiction studied here turn secrets—aspects of social events usually considered too private to publicize—inside out and market them for public consumption, both in print and online. These secrets are consumed by the publishing and reading industries in both meanings of the word *consumed*: they become commodities exchanged in a network of negotiations to be consumed by the reading audience and, by this very act, they cease to be secrets, instead revealing fictional images of the private self, fashioned for public consumption.

Both Chinese society and print culture since the Deng era (1978–97) have been influenced by the digital revolution.² The Internet connected China to the world in 1994 and has been developing exponentially since the late 1990s.³ By December 2008, China had become the world's largest Web population, with 298 million users and an Internet penetration rate of 22.6 percent, thus exceeding the world average

¹ I would like to thank Yongnian Zheng, National University of Singapore, for valuable comments.

² See Davis, *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China*.

³ CNNIC, "The Internet Timeline of China 1997–2000."

of 21.9 percent.⁴ Despite media commercialization and decentralization, the party-state has managed to retain control of the print media through licensing policies and censorship. The use of nonofficial channels of publishing and distribution implies a radical decentralization of publishing in China.

The following study is divided into four main sections. The first section discusses the emergence of a new literature at the turn of the millennium. The second section focuses on three case studies of works by new authors—Wei Hui 卫慧 (b. 1973), Mian Mian 棉棉 (b. 1970), and Muzi Mei 木子美 (b. 1978)—to analyze how the print culture of the 1990s has promoted a new style of writing. The third section examines the structure of the new publishing industry. The final section identifies the new reading audiences of different print media.

The New Literature

The late 1990s witnessed the rise of a new generation of young urban writers who added their voices to the discourse on consumption. Chinese critics refer to those writers born around or after 1970 as “Generation X” (literally, “brand-new human race” [*xinxin renlei* 新新人类]).⁵ The members of this generation were small children when Mao died in 1976, have no memories of the Cultural Revolution, and came of age when postsocialism, transnational capital, and consumerism transformed the nation.⁶ This *brand-new wave* of writers supersedes the *new-wave* fiction of the 1980s, which included root-seeking “stray youth” (*shiluodai xiaoshuo* 失落代小说 and avant-garde fiction, as well as the new urban fiction of the 1980s and early 1990s.⁷ Wei Hui, Mian Mian, and Muzi Mei belong to the generation of brand-new wave writers and offer a female perspective on post-Deng print culture.

The theme that links these three women writers is their association with “body writing” (*shenti xiezu* 身体写作).⁸ Body writing has been defined as a narrative genre that emphasizes sensuality, sensi-

⁴ See CNNIC, “Di 23 ci Zhongguo hulian wangluo fazhan zhuangkuang tongji baogao.”

⁵ Cf. Jing Wang, “Bourgeois Bohemians in China?”

⁶ Cf. Sheldon H. Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics*, 53–67.

⁷ Cf. Henry Y. H. Zhao, *The Lost Boat*, 9–18.

⁸ Cf. Liu Dan, “Shenti yu nüxing wenxue,” 100–103; Jiang and Wang, “Shenti xiezu yu nüxing wenxue,” 31–33.

tivity, and focus on private experience.⁹ Fudan University professor Ge Hongbing 葛红兵 coined the term in a critique of Wei Hui and Mian Mian in 1999. Although the majority of body writers are female, the concept does not necessarily carry gender-specific overtones: Ge Hongbing, for example, published a semiautobiographical novel, *Love and Illusion* (*Shachuang* 沙床, literally "Sand bed"), earning fame as China's first "male body writer." The female authors, however, remain critical of the term "body writing" and insist their writings differ from autobiography.¹⁰

Critics have also labeled the works of these writers "privacy literature" (*yinsi wenxue* 隐私文学), a term coined in 1994 to refer to autobiographical fiction, by Chinese female authors, that focuses "on women's private lives, especially their sexual experiences."¹¹ Bonnie McDougall traces the origins of privacy literature to *At War with One-self* (*Yige ren de zhanzheng* 一个人的战争, 1994), by Lin Bai 林白 (b. 1958) and *Private Life* (*Siren shenghuo* 私人生活, 1996), by Chen Ran 陈染 (b. 1962)—novels that opened the debate on sexuality and female homoeroticism in mainland China.¹² Wei Hui and Mian Mian have placed themselves in the category of privacy literature.¹³

By exposing female privacy in the literary discourse, these young writers fashion—and market—images of the female body and self. The tradition of female self-fashioning in literature dates back to imperial China.¹⁴ *Miss Sophie's Diary* (*Shafei nüshi de riji*, 莎菲女士的日记, 1927), by May Fourth writer Ding Ling 丁玲 (1904–1986), gave readers the illusion of accessing a young, intellectual, revolutionary woman's private diary. The women writers of the 1990s also echo the literary construction of the "New Woman" in the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁵

In contrast to earlier privacy literature, works by the younger authors present themselves more consciously as consumer products. The authors' focus on privacy has become part of a best-selling strategy, in which private lives are exposed for public consumption, and works of fiction are marketed as commodities. The texts propagate

⁹ Kun Zhang, "Bodies Melting into Words."

¹⁰ Cf. Kong, *Consuming Literature*, 114ff.

¹¹ Ibid., 102.

¹² McDougall, "Discourse on Privacy by Women Writers in Late Twentieth-Century China," 97–119, especially 100.

¹³ Cf. Kong, *Consuming Literature*, 102.

¹⁴ See Berg, "Female Self-Fashioning in Late Imperial China," 238–289.

¹⁵ Ferry, "Marketing Chinese Women Writers in the 1990s," 664.

the consumerism that surrounds their production.¹⁶ Themes revolve around private life in China's cities, the new urban lifestyle, and the dreams and nightmares that China's economic transformation has produced.

The works of Wei Hui, Mian Mian, and Muzi Mei share similar publishing histories. They became best sellers and, although they incurred official bans, continued to be widely available by shifting between old and new media: Wei Hui and Mian Mian's banned books have survived as digital texts on the Web, while the contents of Muzi Mei's censored Web pages reappeared in print, when she published her blog as a book. Michel Hockx notes that Chinese "Web literature" (*wangluo wenxue* 网络文学) has become a "recognized genre within print culture" and distinguishes itself from conventionally published literature to a limited extent only.¹⁷ Internet literature closely follows the narrative conventions, literary practices, and value judgments of print culture. Similar to print literature, Internet literature is also subject to state censorship.¹⁸ The following sections of this study look at the publishing histories of three banned best sellers as case studies of the new print culture.

Wei Hui and Shanghai Baby

The author Zhou Weihui 周卫慧 uses her first name Wei Hui ("Protector of Wisdom") as a pen name.¹⁹ The daughter of an army officer, Wei Hui was born in Yuyao 余姚, Zhejiang province, in 1973 and grew up in and around Shanghai. In 1995 she graduated from the Department of Chinese Literature at Fudan University and began working as a freelance writer—a new phenomenon in post-Mao China.²⁰ In 2003 she visited Columbia University to research her novel *Marrying Buddha* (*Wode chan* 我的禅, literally, "My Buddha," 2004).²¹ She currently divides her time between Shanghai and New York.

¹⁶ Cf. Davis, "Urban Consumer Culture," 692–709.

¹⁷ Hockx, "Virtual Chinese Literature," 671.

¹⁸ Cf. Barry, *Red—The New Black*.

¹⁹ Cf. Wang Yu, "Wei Hui xiaoshuo xinlun," 83–97; Fu Jian'an, "Wei Hui xiaoshuo de hou xiandai xushi kuanghuan," 53–56.

²⁰ Cf. Berg, "Publishing Industry," 220–225.

²¹ Cf. Zhu Chongke, "Xin dongfang zhuyi," 72–77.

Wei Hui's first major novel, *Shanghai Baby* (*Shanghai baobei* 上海宝贝), was published in China in September 1999 by Cloth Tiger Series (Bu laohu congshu 布老虎丛书) through the Beijing office of Harbin Spring Breeze Art and Literature Publishing House (Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe 春风文艺出版社).²² The novel sold about half a million copies within six months.²³

In April 2000 Wei Hui resorted to a provocative strategy to promote her novel, by wearing revealing clothing during a press conference in Chengdu, Sichuan province.²⁴ Her picture made the headlines of the local tabloid press.²⁵ The women's magazine *Life on Stage* (*Wutai yu rensheng* 舞台与人生) covered the story in detail.²⁶ Wei Hui's act sold body writing to the press and public by literally having the image of her body imprinted onto her story. Both in her fiction and book promotion, Wei Hui turns privacy inside out for profit and concludes that she "no longer wishes to conceal anything."²⁷

The press conference apparently led the Chinese authorities to ban Wei Hui's novel later that month. The power over licensing policies and censorship of all print media lies with the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP, Xinwen chubanzongshu 新闻出版总署), a government body under the control of the State Council but overseen by the Party Central Committee's Propaganda Department. The censors pulped the remaining forty thousand copies of *Shanghai Baby* and ordered the publisher's Beijing office to shut down. Wei Hui's publisher, An Boshun 安波舜, the editor in chief of Spring Breeze Art and Literature Publishing House, explains that the book was banned because of "sex descriptions which had a negative influence on juveniles."²⁸ Others cite the book's references to Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy" as the reason for triggering the official ban.²⁹

Although the press reported the ban, no original official document has come to light thus far. In recent practice GAPP has been known to

²² On *Shanghai Baby*, see Knight, *The Heart of Time*, 243–258.

²³ Not enough to reach a large percentage of China's literate population (estimated at 800 million), but still large compared to the print runs (as low as 1,700 copies) of some commercial authors in China.

²⁴ Cf. Kong, *Consuming Literature*, 110.

²⁵ Knight, "Shanghai Cosmopolitan," 639–653.

²⁶ *Wutai yu rensheng* 5 (2000), n.p.

²⁷ Cf. Kong, *Consuming Literature*, 112.

²⁸ Zhang Kun, "Bodies Melting into Words."

²⁹ Jeanne Hong Zhang, *The Invention of a Discourse*, 195.

ban certain publications by issuing no more than a phone call to the publisher, making the origins of, or reasons behind, book bans hard to trace.³⁰ However, one cannot exclude the possibility that the publisher, or even the author, promoted or provoked the ban, perhaps on a local level, as a publicity stunt. News of the official ban, as reported in the press, added both notoriety and publicity. The novel continued to circulate in Greater China, on the Internet and in translation in Europe and other countries, such as Japan and the United States. It became an international best seller, with rights in eighteen countries, selling two hundred thousand copies in Japan alone within a year. Wei Hui herself boasts about the ban on her Web site.³¹ The Web site markets Wei Hui with pictures, interviews, and extracts from her writings, but it also functions as an act of defiance, featuring her writings online, with links to the banned novel and her other works.³²

An Boshun was forced to resign as editor in chief of Spring Breeze in May 2000, and his publishing enterprise was suspended for eight months, but his Cloth Tiger Series resumed publication in 2001.³³ In 2005 and 2006, copies of Wei Hui's sequel, *Marrying Buddha*, were available in China. Wei Hui claims she had to self-censor her manuscript in order to publish it in the PRC.³⁴ Self-censorship now appears to be a common publishing strategy in China³⁵—among many strategies for self-advertising a new novel—by adding an aura of notoriety and implicit scandal while building on the success of a previously banned best seller. In the absence of what Wei Hui alleges was the original complete and uncensored manuscript, there are few ways to assess the extent of literary self-censorship. Certain outside pressures such as literary convention and market-driven or publisher-driven directives causing self-censorship often play some part in this mode of cultural production.

³⁰ Private communication, Yongnian Zheng, National University of Singapore, June 12, 2008.

³¹ Wei, homepage.

³² The link to *Shanghai baobei* from Wei Hui's personal Web site does not appear to work as of June 20, 2008, but the novel is available on other sites. See, for example, <http://www.tianyabook.com/shanghaibaobei/index.htm>; <http://www.oklinknet/00/0323/index.htm>; <http://www.shuku.net:8082/novels/dangdai/shanghaibaobei/shbb.html>; http://www.xiaoshuo.com/readindex/index_0018576.html (all accessed September 6, 2009).

³³ Kong, *Consuming Literature*, 55.

³⁴ Prentice, "Bridget Jones with a Little More between the Ears."

³⁵ See McDougall, *Fictional Authors, Imaginary Audiences*, 205–220.

The plot of *Shanghai Baby* traces a traditional love triangle involving two men and one woman. The first-person narrator also acts as the main protagonist, CoCo (written in Roman letters). The narrative voice reveals itself as a female novelist who writes semiautobiographical fiction, blurring the boundaries between author and narrator. The narrator reveals herself, for voyeuristic consumption, in intimate detail. This act of consumption is not gratuitous; the narrator, as the implied novelist, says explicitly that her writings are profit driven. CoCo finds herself entangled in romantic liaisons with two lovers: Tian Tian 天天, a young Chinese avant-garde painter; and Mark, a married businessman from Berlin, who lives the expatriate "high life" in Shanghai. Both affairs end in tragedy; Tian Tian's addiction to heroin resolves only with his suicide, while Mark leaves CoCo, in the end, for his own country and family.

The narrative voice brands the discourse in several ways, combining consumerism with art and cliché. The narrator states that CoCo's name refers to the image of the fashion icon Chanel, although the use of two capital Cs marks it as a name with a difference. The name also puns on Coco, the French perfume—one of the exotic Western products that have fueled Chinese consumer dreams for the past two decades.³⁶ The references to exotic consumer goods are part of the discourse that identifies the text as a product of modernity and globalization. But the references also add a touch of absurdity to the tale; Mark, too, is identified with a luxury product—the perfume CK (Calvin Klein).³⁷ We witness not only a story of star-crossed lovers, but a comedy of consumption and commercialization.

Wei Hui's contemporary and rival, the best-selling author Mian Mian, also explicitly ponders the issue of branding herself and her writings. In the online piece "My Brand-Name Life" ("Wo de mingpai shenghuo" 我的名牌生活) she plays with the idea of brand names as costumes or masks for herself and concludes: "Mian Mian is my brand name."³⁸ The new authors discussed in this study thus dramatize, in fictional and nonfictional discourse, how their texts participate in the commercialization of cultural production.

³⁶ On the consumer revolution, see Hooper, "Globalisation and Resistance in Post-Mao China," 440.

³⁷ See Wei, *Shanghai baobei*, 33.

³⁸ Mian Mian, "Wo de mingpai shenghuo"; cf. Ferry, "Marketing Chinese Women Writers in the 1990s," 670–671.

The new authors' works also illuminate the dark side of consumer culture, conveying a melancholy ambivalence about the modern age.³⁹ The portrayals of urban youth culture include drug abuse and teenage suicide; both are new topics in post-Mao Chinese literature and taboos breached by the new women writers. Although Wei Hui's novel includes such themes, they feature even more prominently in the works of Mian Mian.

Mian Mian and Candy

Mian Mian (b. 1970) is the pseudonym of Wang Shen 王莘, who works as a freelance writer in her native Shanghai.⁴⁰ She dropped out of school in 1987 and found herself drifting in Shenzhen from 1989 to 1994 before returning to Shanghai. She overcame heroin addiction, through rehabilitation, and started to work as a DJ, music promoter, and dance-party organizer. She is divorced from her British husband, with whom she has a child. Mian Mian began writing as a teenager, but in the late 1980s publishers rejected her stories about teenage suicide, a subject deemed unsuitable for publication in literary magazines. Her short stories were first published in 1997 by the magazine *Fiction World* (*Xiaoshuo jie* 小说界). That same year, her first book, *Lalala* (*Lalala* 啦啦啦), a collection of short stories, appeared in print in Hong Kong. Currently, she also writes columns for the Hong Kong independent newspaper *Apple Daily* and, since 2003, for several mainland Chinese lifestyle magazines.

In January 2000 the PRC publishing house Zhongguo xiju chubanshe 中国戏剧出版社 (Chinese drama publishing house) released Mian Mian's first novel *Candy* (*Tang* 糖), a semiautobiographical work dealing with heroin addiction, teenage suicide, and AIDS. Its plot is based on stories from the collection *Lalala*. *Candy* simultaneously appeared in the prestigious literary magazine *Harvest* (*Shouhuo* 收获) and sold forty thousand copies within the first two months.⁴¹ The novel was banned in April of that year, along with *Shanghai Baby*. Shortly after-

³⁹ On melancholy ambivalence in Japanese literature and popular culture, see Treat, "Yoshimoto Banana Writes Home," 366, 375.

⁴⁰ For her biographical self-representation, see Mian Mian, homepage. On Mian Mian, see Ren, "Haipai nüzuojia de liubian guiji yu neizai chayi," 44–47.

⁴¹ Cf. Mian Mian, *La la la*.

ward, Mian Mian's other works were also banned, but reappeared on the Internet.⁴² Her fiction has been translated into Japanese and several European languages.

Mian Mian's novel *Candy* turns, as her preface claims, "garbage into candy."⁴³ The text recycles consumer waste into food for consumption, turning a story of urban tragedy into best-selling fiction. This sets her apart from Wei Hui, for in Wei Hui's narratives, characters themselves turn into consumer waste. Garbage becomes a metaphor for people; dysfunctional families appear as the symptoms of a malaise brought on by consumer society.⁴⁴

The government removed the ban on Mian Mian's writings in 2002, allowing publication of a book based on her newspaper column. Her latest novel *Panda Sex* (*Xiongmao* 熊猫, literally "Panda") was printed by the small independent Beijing publisher Qun Yan 群言 in 2005.⁴⁵ *Panda Sex* reflects on the flawed love lives of Shanghai urbanites, a departure from *Candy* and its depictions of the underground world of drugs, addiction, and suicide.

Mian Mian recognized, early on, how the Internet could empower a writer. Enraged by the editors and publishers who censored her first traditional-print stories, she declared in an interview in 2000, "If they change what I want to say, I'll just put everything on the Net."⁴⁶

The following section looks at an author who reversed Mian Mian's trajectory by starting to publish online and only later selling her writings in traditional book format.

Muzi Mei's Blog

Muzi Mei (b. 1978), born Li Li 李丽, a columnist from Guangzhou, has used the Internet to take the concept of privacy literature further than print literature has done.⁴⁷ A whole new discourse on body writing emerged on the Internet when Muzi Mei launched her Web site in the summer of 2003 with her blog (web log, online diary), a narrative

⁴² For a Web site providing access to *Candy*, see Mian Mian, *Tang*. For a print version from Taiwan, see Mian Mian, *Tang* (Taipei: Shengzhi, 2000).

⁴³ Mian Mian, "Preface," xi.

⁴⁴ See Wei, *Shanghai baobei*, 15.

⁴⁵ Cf. "Mian Mian Reaches Maturity with *Panda Sex*."

⁴⁶ Jones, "The Vampire Chronicle."

⁴⁷ Yuan Jiansheng, "Xuni shijie zhong de 'tiaozhan,'" 40–43, 87.

posing as autobiography. The pen name Muzi Mei is a pun on the author's real name:⁴⁸ the characters for *mu* 木 and *zi* 子 together make up the character of her surname Li 李; *mei* 美 ("beautiful") is a synonym of *li* 丽, the character of her given name. The combination of characters in Muzi sounds foreign in Chinese and evokes an allusion to Japanese names. The postmodern best-selling Japanese novelist Yoshimoto Banana 吉本ばなな (b. 1964), who dramatizes youth culture and consumerism in Japan, also pens an online diary, but it lacks the aura of scandal that surrounds Muzi Mei's. By revealing her secrets online, Muzi Mei titillates her readers with the illusion of consuming the details of her private life almost in real time as she catalogues her erotic exploits in daily installments.

Muzi Mei's collected online writings appeared as a book, *Ashes of Love* (*Yiqingshu* 遗情书), in November 2003. The authorities banned her Web site and book within three days of publication, but she achieved record popularity on alternative Web sites, and pirate copies of the printed book circulated widely. Her publisher, Twenty-First Century Publishing House (Ershiyi shiji chubanshe 二十一世纪出版社) in Nanchang 南昌, Jiangxi province, admitted being aware of the ban but would not say why the book was forbidden.⁴⁹ In the wake of the ban, publishers, dot-com companies, and magazines have marketed the Muzi Mei phenomenon to maximum profit.⁵⁰

Muzi Mei has created shock waves throughout the Internet audience by pushing the limits of freedom of expression in contemporary China.⁵¹ Reactions on the Internet have made it clear that readers consider the contents of her online entries to be so private that they question whether such revelations merit publication. In particular, they condemn Muzi Mei's descriptions of erotic encounters in which she names celebrities from the art and music world as her partners. Public opinion, as reflected in chat rooms, appears to condone her revealing the private self, but disapproves of her infringing on the privacy of others.⁵²

⁴⁸ On the transcription of her name, see Goldkorn, "A Short Interview with Muzi Mei."

⁴⁹ "Internet Sexual Diaries Are Banned."

⁵⁰ For example, *Marie Claire China* (November 2003) ran an article on Muzi Mei, titled "Sex, the City, and the Private Diary."

⁵¹ Muzi, *Yiqing shu*.

⁵² Yardley, "Internet Sex Column Thrills, and Inflames, China."

Internet readers do not seem to take into account that Muzi Mei peddles a literary product that provides merely the illusion of access to the pages of a young woman's intimate diary. Unadulterated by an editor's or a publisher's interventions, the blog *appears* to reproduce the author's raw materials and provide insight into her "real" experiences and "true self." The chain of transmission of the work—from the author as producer to the reader as consumer—may be significantly shorter than in traditional publishing, eliminating the roles of agent, editor, and publisher, but the product remains an artifact, even if it masquerades as a "private diary."

The willingness of the reading public in China to take Muzi Mei's blog at face value perhaps indicates current directions in print culture and in the values promoted by the new consumer culture. Lifestyle magazines and nonfictional works that expose the secret lives of pop stars, actresses, other celebrities, and prominent politicians enjoy popularity among the Chinese readership, generating record sales and vying with fiction for best seller status⁵³—a topic that the following section addresses.

Commercial Publishing

China's consumer culture has produced a new phenomenon in the post-Mao era: best seller consciousness (*changxiao yishi* 畅销意识). The narrative voice of *Shanghai Baby* displays this phenomenon throughout its presentation. CoCo reveals herself as dreaming of writing a best seller, and she makes explicit that she does it for profit: "I have again started writing a novel. Hopefully it will become a best seller and make enough money for me to go on a trip to Europe."⁵⁴

This statement shows how the commercial side of book publishing is now exploited in new writings, as authors state directly that they are interested in making money. This attitude clashes with Communist ideals that look to the common welfare and scorn individual profit, as well as with the traditional ideal of the Chinese scholar-gentleman's attitude toward money.⁵⁵

⁵³ Cf. Schell, *Mandate of Heaven*, 301. For a literary dramatization of this trend, see Zhang Xin, "Ai you ru he?" 4–32.

⁵⁴ Wei, *Shanghai baobei*, 93.

⁵⁵ Cf. Berg, *Carnival in China*.

Nonetheless, the concept of the best seller has existed in China since at least medieval times: a Tang dynasty saying—"Luoyang zhi gui" 洛阳纸贵—has it that the price of paper rose as scholars were competing to copy a coveted poem.⁵⁶ In the late Ming dynasty, stories by famous scholars enjoyed such popularity that, according to Ming observers, they sold like hotcakes in the market.⁵⁷ In modern China, best-seller status is determined by numbers of copies sold, advances and royalties earned, and rank lists that are compiled by critics, publishers, and magazines.⁵⁸ In 1993, official sources named the *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping* (*Deng Xiaoping wenxuan* 邓小平文选) as the official best seller⁵⁹—an unsurprising designation since, as Geremie Barmé notes, it was "required reading in nationwide political study sessions."⁶⁰ Yet changes in the publishing industry have generated another type of best seller.

In Deng's China, the commercial publishing industry began to expand rapidly, catering to investors' interests and consumers' demands. Before the privatization of China's economy, the China National Publishing Administration (CNPA, Zhongguo guojia chubanjū 中国新闻出版局) controlled the Publishers Association of China (Zhongguo chubān xiéhuì 中国出版协会) and the distribution network of New China Publishing House (Xinhua shūdiàn 新华书店), the party's major publication organ and official distribution service. In 1987, CNPA was replaced by GAPP.⁶¹ All manuscripts had to undergo editorial review at official publishing houses before GAPP issues the official book registration numbers (*shuhào* 书号, similar to ISBN numbers) legally required for publication.⁶² At the same time, as Nicolai Volland points out, a unique "responsible editor" (*fuze bianji* 负责编辑) system was created, making editors, rather than authors, ultimately responsible for dubious publications.⁶³

⁵⁶ The best seller was *Rhapsody on the Three Capitals* (*San du fu*, ca. fourth century) by Zuo Si (ca. 253–ca. 307).

⁵⁷ *Wanli di chao*, 119.

⁵⁸ Cf. Barmé, *In the Red*, 186.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁶¹ Cf. Berg, "Publishing Industry"; Feldman, "The Organization of Publishing in China," 519–529.

⁶² Schell, *Mandate of Heaven*, 301–306.

⁶³ Volland, "Control of the Media in the People's Republic of China," 234–236.

The privatization of China's economy ended the state monopoly on publishing, which had been held by the Central Committee's propaganda ministry since the Yanan period.⁶⁴ As noted in the introduction to this volume, during the late 1980s a nongovernmental publishing industry, or "second channel," emerged as an alternative to the "red channel," the state-run Xinhua publishing network.⁶⁵ This intermediate zone of semiofficial publishing also produced and promoted the works by the new authors under discussion here.

Second-channel publishing consists of the "white channel" (previously licensed, limited, local distribution networks that moved into unlicensed publishing but avoided controversial contents) and the "black channel" (illegal, profit-driven, underground operations without any license and willing to publish sensitive, censored, or restricted works). The second channel was established by wealthy private entrepreneurs known as "book kings" (*shuwang* 书王).⁶⁶ They run their operations through nationwide personal networks. Second-channel operations are officially prohibited; therefore, estimates about outputs vary widely. The annual number of book titles officially published in China has risen as follows: fifteen thousand in 1978; forty-five thousand six hundred in 1985; approximately eighty thousand in the early 1990s; one hundred twenty thousand in the late 1990s; and 222,473 in 2005.⁶⁷ According to estimates in the early 1990s, up to half of publications were printed using purchased book numbers, or in collaboration with second-channel book traders (*shushang* 书商).⁶⁸ In the early 2000s, estimates attributed around 25 percent of all titles (but most literary works and 80 percent of all best sellers) to second-channel publications.⁶⁹ In 2007, estimates of the number of second-channel publishers ranged from five thousand to thirty thousand.⁷⁰

The second-channel book traders, in turn, began to exercise the imagination of the new urban writers. The story "What's Love?" ("Ai you ru he?" 爱又如何, 1994) by Zhang Xin 张欣 (b. 1954), for example,

⁶⁴ Schell, *Mandate of Heaven*, 296ff.

⁶⁵ Cf. Schell, *Mandate of Heaven*, 293–310; Kong, *Consuming Literature*, 65–94.

⁶⁶ Cf. Schell, *Mandate of Heaven*, 297–305.

⁶⁷ Cf. Feldman, "The Organization of Publishing in China," 521; Barry, *Red—The New Black*, 29.

⁶⁸ Schell, *Mandate of Heaven*, 297.

⁶⁹ Kong, *Consuming Literature*, 75; Barry, *Red—The New Black*, 87.

⁷⁰ Barry, *Red—The New Black*, 87; Soong, "The 'Malignant Tumor' in Chinese Book Publishing."

dramatizes the ways in which a book trader and literary agent help to create a best-selling novelist's career.⁷¹ The book trader in Zhang Xin's story is a nanny, from the countryside, who lacks formal education but makes a fortune in publishing because she instinctively understands the market. Her characterization dramatizes the legendary semiliterate entrepreneurs of the 1980s who became China's first millionaire book kings.⁷²

The development of the new publishers has aided the commercialization of literature. These publishers now work with, or even direct, authors to promote their texts. Shuyu Kong has shown how entrepreneurs have turned publishing houses into best seller machines; second channel publishing satisfies the demand for entertainment while maximizing profits.⁷³

The commercialization of publishing features prominently in *Shanghai Baby*. In her quest to produce a best seller, CoCo turns to her editor, who becomes her literary agent.⁷⁴ In contrast to Zhang Xin's "nanny turned book agent," Wei Hui depicts CoCo's fictional agent as an elite university graduate and a sophisticated Shanghai professional. *Shanghai Baby* dramatizes the new generation of book traders who act as publishers, agents, and even editors, and have dominated commercial publishing since the 1990s. These new publishers are familiar with literary issues, as well as with the vagaries of the marketplace.⁷⁵

The Writer's Income

Did *Shanghai Baby* make enough money for its author to travel to Europe? The three authors under discussion have not disclosed their earnings but, even if they did, it would be hard to verify any claims. The author's income remains confidential to each author, publisher, and the tax authorities. Occasionally a publisher may, as part of a marketing strategy, publicize an author's income figures, such as the one million yuan advance for *Abandoned Capital* (*Feidu* 废都), a 1993 novel by Jia Pingwa 贾平凹 (b. 1952). According to their publisher,

⁷¹ Cf. Berg, *Portraying China's New Women Entrepreneurs*.

⁷² Cf. Schell, *Mandate of Heaven*, 300.

⁷³ Kong, *Consuming Literature*, 37–94.

⁷⁴ Wei, *Shanghai baobei*, 76.

⁷⁵ Kong, *Consuming Literature*, 77.

twenty-first century best-selling authors Han Han 韩寒 (b. 1982), Anni Baobei 安妮宝贝 (b. 1975), and Guo Jingming 郭敬明 (b. 1983) earn three to four million yuan in advances and royalties, per book.⁷⁶ There are no official sales figures for *Shanghai Baby* in China, because the book is banned. Wei Hui's translator, Bruce Humes, notes: "How well the book sold in China is unknown."⁷⁷ If forty thousand copies of the book were burned, and the publisher was fined, the loss to the publisher must have had a negative influence on the author's share. A twenty-first century Chinese author might receive royalties of 8 to 10 percent, but lose out on pirate editions.⁷⁸

Nonetheless, sales income must be significant from foreign translations and best sellers in countries outside China, such as Japan, Europe and the US. Only the writers' tax statements would disclose the evidence, but these are usually not published. The 2007 English-language film version of *Shanghai Baby* (cowritten by Wei Hui, Martin Hennig, and Margot Hennig; directed by Berengar Pfahl) must have added another source of income for Wei Hui. Mian Mian, as noted above, does other work. Muzi Mei traded on her Web notoriety in order to find employment promoting blogging at sina.com. The income from publishing appears sufficient for Wei Hui to continue her full-time writing career, finance an apartment in Manhattan, and support her lifestyle shuttling between Shanghai and New York.

The New Reading Audience

Gender expectations influence both the production and consumption of the new body writing literature. It is possible that the new authors are writing for a predominantly female readership that is looking for entertainment and pleasure. The declared target audience of the novelist narrator in *Shanghai Baby* is the new type of "smart urban girl"—"My dream is that of every trendy bright young woman with wild ambitions; I am writing my new novel for this kind of woman."⁷⁹ In this respect, the new authors continue the direction set by the new

⁷⁶ Martinsen, "Lu Jinbo."

⁷⁷ Fang Fang, interview with Bruce Humes.

⁷⁸ Soong, "The Underground Publishing Industry in China."

⁷⁹ Wei, *Shanghai baobei*, 79.

urban-fiction writers of the 1980s and early 1990s, who directed their work explicitly to women readers.⁸⁰

But some evidence suggests that women may not necessarily be the primary readers of these texts, particularly as they appear on the Internet. Comments posted in the relevant chat rooms appear to stem from netizens of each gender. Men are generally more likely to surf the Internet and read online texts than are women. In 2003, the year Muzi Mei first published her blog, 60.4 percent of netizens were male, compared to 39.6 percent female netizens (in 2008 the ratio was 52.5 to 47.5 percent).⁸¹ And male users spend more time online.⁸² Gender issues aside, Internet users in China tend to be more affluent, better educated, and younger than nonusers.⁸³ Nearly three quarters of all netizens are teenagers or are in their twenties; more than half of the members of the World Wide Web population have a postsecondary diploma.⁸⁴ Students and staff of enterprises make up about two thirds of all Internet users.⁸⁵ Another factor that determines differences in readership—between print and online literature—may be the digital divide in China, a gap that runs along socioeconomic, regional, and gender lines and that points to inequalities between those who have access to the Internet and those who do not.⁸⁶

Until further research is conducted, we can only speculate about the real readers of this new literature. Readers are most likely relatively young educated urban men and women whose enjoyment of such narratives derives from recognition of shared dreams and nightmares. As one fictional publisher remarks to CoCo, "Your writings should target the market of students in higher education and white-collar workers. Women readers in particular might prove rather susceptible to your

⁸⁰ Zhang Xin, "Wo shi shui?" 78; cf. Cheng Wenchao, "Yuhaili de shiqing shouwang," 71–75.

⁸¹ CNNIC, "Di 13 ci Zhongguo hulian wangluo fazhan zhuangkuang tongji baogao"; CNNIC, "Di 23 ci Zhongguo hulian wangluo fazhan zhuangkuang tongji baogao."

⁸² CNNIC, "Di 19 ci Zhongguo hulian wangluo fazhan zhuangkuang tongji baogao."

⁸³ CNNIC, "Di 13 ci...baogao"; CNNIC, "Di 19 ci...baogao"; CNNIC, "Di 23 ci...baogao." On Muzi Mei's readership, see Yardley, "Internet Sex Column Thrills, and Inflames, China."

⁸⁴ CNNIC, "Di 19 ci...baogao."

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Cf. Zheng and Wu, "Information Technologies, Public Sphere, and Collective Action in China," 507–536.

work."⁸⁷ In the absence of hard evidence (and on the basis of existing statistics), this quote might prove to be an accurate summary of the readership for the new literature, especially in traditional print versions, while the online versions may attract a higher percentage of male readers.

Conclusion

To sum up, this study has traced the publishing histories of three female urban authors—Wei Hui, Mian Mian, and Muzi Mei—whose works have bridged print media (in books and magazines) and the Internet at the turn of the twenty-first century. Individual participants in the body-writing genre, Wei Hui and Mian Mian, first published their novels as print books, which, after their official ban in China, acquired a presence as World Wide Web literature. Muzi Mei started her career as an Internet author but gained enough publicity to make a debut in print. Despite the government's stringent measures of Internet control, official bans have not succeeded in eliminating the targeted works. The new texts circumvent such bans by migrating between the media. New trends in publishing works via nonofficial channels testify to a radical decentralization of publishing in recent years, a reversal of the centralizing forces in twentieth-century Chinese print culture discussed in this volume's introduction.

What is perhaps most striking about body-writing literature is its frank reference and appeal to the new commercial economy and consumer culture of the past two decades. The new writers' declared acceptance of profit-driven cultural production goes against the very grain of both traditional Chinese Confucian thought and the Communist ideal of common benefit for the masses, rather than the individual. The body-writing works celebrate the border crossings between the sublime and the banal, popular culture, commercialism, and the avant-garde. In doing so, they create an innovative postmodern discourse.

What other impact has this new literature had? The new print media involve readers more directly, making entrance into debates with the literary works and other readers easier and faster. Works such as *Shanghai Baby*, *Candy*, *Panda Sex*, and *Ashes of Love* are not overtly

⁸⁷ Wei, *Shanghai baobei*, 205.

political, but they discuss, explicitly, the issues of state control and censorship, while pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable speech in public. They debate the issue of freedom of expression with reference to sexuality, not politics. Orville Schell has noted that Muzi Mei's literary "trading in sex" appears as "the ultimate form of self-expression" and is "deeply subversive to everything the [Chinese Communist] Party (not to mention the almost forgotten 'revolution') stands for. She is, in fact, 'digging up dirt right under the Buddha's nose,' to use an old Chinese *chengyu* [saying]."⁸⁸

Following Schell's observations, future studies will have to explore the potential for dissident expression through displacement in body-writing literature.⁸⁹ The new writings have inspired intense debate among critics, scholars, publishers, and readers, and have created a niche market for literary discourse on the body and the books that consume its secrets on the printed page and online.

⁸⁸ Cf. Schell, comment on "New York Times article on Muzi Mei."

⁸⁹ Ibid.