

Grown-up Dolls: An Analysis of Professional Critics' and Readers' Reviews of Three Beauty Writers

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Abstract

This thesis analyses the reception of three Chinese women writers (Mian Mian, Wei Hui and Chun Shu), part of a group of female authors known as Beauty Writers, by professional critics and popular readers. The reception of the Beauty Writers by the public in the People's Republic of China, their native country, has been the focus of very few researches. I seek to add to the existing corpus of research by analysing two different types of reviews: the comments of intellectuals, such as professional critics, fellow writers, editors and professors, and the reviews of general readers who published their remarks on the internet. I will base the examination of the comments on the theory of reader-response criticism, which was born in Western literature and states that the reader shapes the meaning of a text, and that the text is thus not an isolated and self-standing work. By considering the external elements that help the readers judge a work, I seek to understand the reasons behind the positive or negative comments on the Beauty Writers' works, which have drawn much media attention soon after their publications in the early 2000s. I propose that despite the early heated discussions about the literary worth of the Beauty Writers, in the end the perception of their writing style has reached normalisation, with the inclusion of the writers in the history of Chinese literature.

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Introduction

At the beginning of the new millennium, the People's Republic of China witnessed the emergence of a new category of women writers who would become a sensational piece of news, both in the literature and in the media, with the collective name of "Beauty Writers" (美女作家, *Meinü Zuoqia*). These young 20-something authors wrote about topics that were previously considered taboo when represented by mainstream Chinese women writers:¹ topics such as drugs, nightlife and especially their personal sexual desires. These books on controversial and shocking topics caused a sensation amongst readers and critics. In some cases, controversy led to novels being banned, especially when their authors claimed to have personally lived the taboo experiences narrated in their stories (Goldblatt 2007: 169). The Beauty Writers' novelty and the sensationalism that they caused spurred many discussions, both in the literary world and among the common readers, leading to controversies and debates on their literary worth and their public personas.

In this thesis, I decided to analyse the works and reception of three of such women writers, in order to assess the impression they left on the public and in the world of literary criticism in mainland China. The writers I have decided to analyse are Mian Mian (绵绵), Wei Hui (卫慧) and Chun Shu (春树). This choice stems from the importance they had above other writers of the same category for the Chinese literature and media. Namely, Mian Mian and Wei Hui have been the pioneers of this genre, Wei Hui having used the term for the first time ever in an issue of the Chinese literary magazine *Writer* (作家杂志, *Zuoqia Zazhi*) (Yang 2011: 3), which presented an introduction to seven Beauty Writers in a special issue published in July 1998.² Mian Mian and Wei Hui also represent the public face of the literary genre, having been featured widely in the press in the early 2000s not so much for their literary prowess, but rather for the controversies caused by their themes and by their fights with each other (Scheen 2006). I have chosen Chun Shu for a different reason: she is 10 years younger than the previous

¹ The Beauty Writers are considered a novelty as far their themes are concerned, however this is not to say that they are an absolute novelty as far as women writers in China are concerned. In fact, women writing in China goes as far back as the imperial era. Studies and anthologies of writing women in China include *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China* (Idema and Grant, 2004), *Women and Writing in Modern China* (Larson, 1998), *Writing Women in Modern China: An Anthology of Women's Literature from the Early Twentieth Century* (Dooling and Torgeson, 1998), *Writing Women in Modern China: The Revolutionary Years, 1936-1976* (Dooling, 2005), *Women Writers in Postsocialist China* (Schaffer and Song, 2013), and many others.

² Zong, R. (Ed.) (1998). Qishi niandai chusheng de nüzuojia xiaoshuo zhuanhao [七十年代出生的女作家小说专号, Special issue on the novels of women writers born in the 1970s]. *Zuoqia zazhi*, 353 (7).

two writers, and has published her books after the rise to fame of the category itself. I think she is a foremost example of an author that has taken inspiration from the older Beauty Writers, to such an extent that she joined the same category when writing her own works. Analysing her works and statements can be useful in assessing the importance of the Beauty Writers' legacy for both the public and the literary world.

As far as my analysis is concerned, I want to take into consideration the way Chinese readers received these three authors in order to assess whether their novelty and sensationalism, and the positive or negative remarks they received in their reviews, were caused mainly by the topics the writers talked about or by the way they presented themselves in public. To do so, I will initially provide an overview of the first literary sources, that is the writers' original works that I examined, where possible, in the original language, in order to avoid cultural and literary adjustments that happen with translation. In addition to the first-hand works written by the authors, I have also studied a substantial number of articles, books and researches on several aspects of the Beauty Writers phenomenon that have been written by various scholars over the past years.³ Most importantly, though, I have analysed and categorised literary and public criticism about the three writers I take into consideration. When I first decided to undertake such an analysis, my first source for literary criticism was a book published by an author that goes under the pseudonym Ta Ai (他爱, which translates in English as "He Loves"), *Shi Meinü Zuojiā Pipān Shū* (十美女作家批判书, 2005), which roughly translates as "A Book of Criticism of Ten Beauty Writers". This work provides very harsh criticism of the Beauty Writers phenomenon, and in my early days of research was the only one I found that included Wei Hui, Mian Mian and Chun Shu together. However, I later learned how the criticism proposed by Ta Ai is exceedingly negative and does not necessarily represent the views held by other literary critics (Liu 2010: 107-108). In fact, the Beauty Writers were brought to stardom in the first place by well-established personalities in the Chinese literary world, who believed them to be worthy of a space in Chinese literature (Yang 2011: 3). Instead, one of my main sources for literary reviews and criticism of the Beauty Writers became Jia Liu's PhD thesis, *The Reception of the Works of Contemporary Chinese Glam-Writers in Mainland China* (2010), which features a great deal of critics' reviews of the Beauty Writers works in general. Where she already mentioned comments and remarks, I will use her translations. However, I am going to

³ *From Beauty Fear to Beauty Fever: A Critical Study of Contemporary Chinese Women Writers* (Xin Yang, 2011), *Popular Culture and Body Politics: Beauty Writers in Contemporary China* (Sheldon Lu, 2008) and *Marketing Chinese Women Writers in the 1990s, or the Politics of Self-Fashioning* (Megan Ferry, 2010) are amongst my foremost sources.

expand her analysis to include Chun Shu, who is not featured in her work, in order to add a new aspect to already established research in the field.

As far as the public's reception is concerned, I will use a heuristic approach in order to undertake my analysis in what I hope is the most effective way. I will engage in a comprehensive research of internet reviews, thanks to the huge presence of literary blogs, forums and commentaries on the Chinese internet.⁴ Although an extensive exploration of internet literature as a genre would exceed the scope of this thesis, it is nonetheless noteworthy that, as of 2012, the China Internet Network Information Center reported that around 40% of all Chinese internet users utilised their connection to access literature online, with numbers raising 12% the following year.⁵ Moreover, in the same period around 700.000 writers published their works online, compared to the much smaller number of 8000 members of the Chinese Writers Association.⁶ In the early steps of my research, I browsed the English-language internet in search for comments and reviews of the Beauty Writers works, starting with websites that provide spaces for readers' reviews such as Goodreads. However, I soon found out that the Chinese public rarely engages in the English-language internet, also thanks to the presence of specially designed spaces and social media for Mandarin speakers that surpass English-language content in numbers and participation. Therefore, I set out to research Chinese-language blogs and forums, which provide hundreds and sometimes thousands of comments and fully-fledged reviews for every work of the Beauty Writers. This approach is the most effective also considering that most of the Beauty Writers' works have not been published in the West after the first era of sensationalism, when a great deal of the marketing strategy for selling their books was the "banned in China" banner (Goldblatt 2007: 164).⁷ Therefore, searching the Chinese internet was the only way to find comments and reviews of the books that have not been published in the West. Amongst the many Chinese websites and social media which allow users to post content, I have found the social network Douban (豆瓣) has a special section dedicated to users' reviews of books, where the works of the three Beauty Writers concerned have received a substantial number of reviews. Chun Shu's *Beijing Doll* (北京娃娃, *Beijing Wawa*) alone has received almost 3000 comments and reviews, as of April 2016.⁸ I will explore comments in depth,

⁴ Online literature in China is a very developed field, which has been studied by many researchers such as Serena Zuccheri (*Letteratura Web in Cina* [Web literature in China], 2008) and Michel Hockx (*Internet Literature in China*, 2015).

⁵ "CNNIC released the 32nd Statistical Report on Internet Development" (2013, July 22) in *China Internet Network Information Center*. Retrieved from http://www1.cnnic.cn/AU/MediaC/rdxw/hotnews/201307/t20130722_40723.htm

⁶ "Lo sviluppo della letteratura cinese in rete e la scrittrice Yan Jiu" [The development of Chinese literature online and the writer Yan Jiu] (2012, February 7) in *CRI Online – Radio Cina Internazionale*. Retrieved from <http://italian.cri.cn/861/2012/02/07/125s157037.htm>

⁷ Eng, D. (2004, August 4). "Banned in Beijing: Diary of a bored and spoiled brat" in *USA Today*. Retrieved from http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/books/reviews/2004-08-04-beijing-doll_x.htm

⁸ "Beijing Doll" in *Douban Books*. Retrieved from <https://book.douban.com/subject/1041111/>

looking for patterns that explain why the reviews are positive or negative, especially looking for the reasons behind negative comments. Do they stem from the opinion readers have of the writers as public personas, or are they purely related to the protagonists of the stories, writing style, authenticity or other literary characteristics? Do readers' comments also reflect the judgement of professional critics, or do they offer different perspectives?

Outline of the thesis

To undertake my research effectively, I will structure the thesis in a way to provide the reader with ample context. I will start with a chapter dedicated to explaining the Beauty Writers phenomenon in more depth, which will feature separate sub-chapters for each of the writers that I am going to analyse in detail. I will mention the most prominent fictional works of each writer, however for a detailed list of all works published by the authors, please refer to Appendix 1, which also features essays, poetry and collections.

The second chapter will provide a geographical context for the most popular and well-known works of the three authors, as well as exploring the features that make such geographical context so important. I decided to dedicate an entire chapter to the concept of "the city" in the Beauty Writers' works for a series of reasons: firstly, this phenomenon is a foremost example of Chinese "urban literature", which develops against the backdrop of the transforming and ever changing cityscapes of China's modern cities, of which Shanghai is a leading example (Scheen 2015); secondly, the Beauty Writers themselves tend to render the city as the centre of attention, as testified by titles such as *Shanghai Baby* (上海宝贝, *Shanghai Baobei*) and *Beijing Doll*; and lastly, these references to the cities, which are almost personified as independent characters, have been taken up by many readers and commenters on the internet, who often mention them in their reviews in terms of authenticity and relatability.

My third and last chapter before the conclusion will be the core of the thesis, in which I will analyse the reviews I collected and categorised. The chapter will be divided in two main sub-chapters, one for the professional criticism and one for the readers' comments and reviews. Additionally, I will divide professional criticism by theme, namely according to the reviewers' critiques of the writers as people (and especially as females) and according to their pure assessments of the works as literary productions. As I already mentioned, the analysis of readers' comments will be based on a heuristic approach, which will help me identify the most commonly used words and, thus, the most common motives for giving

a positive or a negative review, which in turn will help understand the general assessment on the concerned Beauty Writers' works. Additionally, the professional critics' section will also draw attention to traditional Chinese literary values, which inform the judgement of Chinese intellectuals. Traditionally, Chinese critics tend to distinguish between *élite* and popular (or high and low, respectively) literature, assigning greater literary worth to the former and considering the latter as mere entertainment driven by the market (Xu 2008: 68). This distinction is important in the context of the Beauty Writers' criticism, in view of the fact that such writers are often considered as producing low, or popular, literature.

The last part of the thesis will be the concluding remarks, in which I will assess the deductions and insights I will have gained after the analysis of the reviews, as pertaining to the questions I posed before, namely the reasons behind the positive or negative comments of critics and readers. Despite the apparent majority of negative reviews by professional critics and accusations of superficiality and inauthenticity by many online commenters, the Beauty Writers have become an established part of the Chinese literature, leaving their marks on the Chinese literary scene and in many other studies and researches. I will finally propose more questions and interesting points for the development of further research on the topic.

Chapter 1: The Beauty Writers

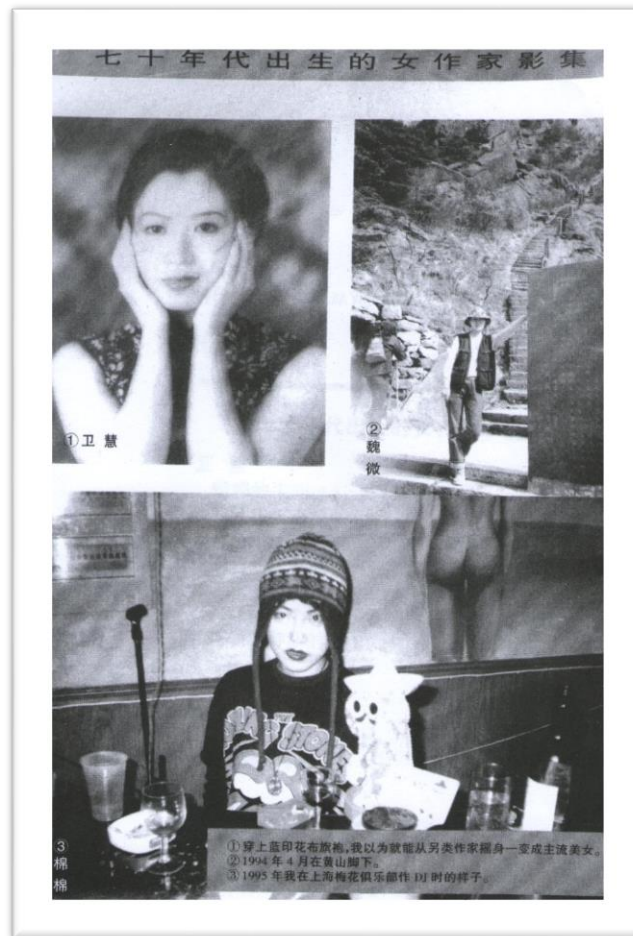


Figure 1. Presentation image of *Writer* magazine's special issue, July 1998. Wei Hui is on the left, Wei Wei on the right and Mian Mian on the bottom. Adapted from "Qishi niandai chusheng de nüzuojia xiaoshuo zhuanhao [七十年代出生的女作家小说专号, Special issue on the novels of women writers born in the 1970s]", by Zong, R. (Ed.), 1998, *Zuojia zazhi*, 353 (7).

At the end of the 1990s, close to the beginning of the New Millennium, a new category of women writers began to be established in China: they were the so-called Beauty Writers (美女作家, *Meinü Zuojia*), part of a generation of Chinese authors, both male and female, known as Post-70s Generation. The name of the group has often been paired with the term *Xinxin renlei* (新新人类), or "Newly new humanity", which describes a new group of Chinese young people who were brought up under material wellbeing, unaware of the struggles of the Cultural Revolution, whose narratives were in fact predominant in the previous generation of writers born in the 1960s. They grew up in a period during which China started to be invaded by Western commodities and the urban youth of the People's

Republic began to display more and more cravings for consumer products and lifestyles. The desire for material wealth is reflected in the works of the writers of this new generation, whose “important contribution [...] to the literary scene was a kind of individualised writing at the core of which was the expression of desire” (Shao 2009: 13). The Beauty Writers had a foremost role in the Post-70s Generation of culture producers, since the percentage of successful women writers in that period exceeded that of males (Shao 2009: 13), and influenced greatly subsequent generations of young female authors. I will dedicate the following paragraph to an overview of the Beauty Writers as a group, followed by a more detailed description of Mian Mian, Wei Hui and Chun Shu. A background on the authors is fundamental for the understanding of their works, as well as of the reviews that critics and readers give them, which will be further analysed in the last chapter.

The first appearance of the Beauty Writers in the literary world happened in July 1998, in a special issue of the literature magazine *Writer*. The issue featured a number of authors described as “women writers born in the 1970s”, and included Wei Hui and Mian Mian as two of the foremost figures, accompanied by names such as Zhu Wenying (朱文颖), Zhou Jieru (周洁茹), Jin Renshun (金人顺), Wei Wei (魏微) and Dai Lai (戴来).⁹ This special issue was planned and promoted by some important and established personas in the literary environment of the time, namely editor-in-chief of *Writer* Zong Renfa (宗仁发), literary critic and researcher Shi Zhanjun (施战军), and vice editor-in-chief of *People's Literature* magazine (人民文学, *Renmin Wenxue*) Li Jingze (李敬泽), therefore it had quite a resonance in the Chinese literary world (Yang 2011: 3). These outstanding names of the Chinese literature of the time, who were all male, shaped the initial way in which viewers and readers would perceive this set of women who wrote for women. They presented the Beauty Writers as a novelty in Chinese literature, but scholar Xin Yang has argued that “male intellectuals/editors [...] brought to light the young female writers in a way that was more or less related to sensationalist pursuits” (Yang 2011: 6), pointing out how the initial part of the sensationalism caused by the Beauty Writers might have been indeed a strategy to popularise them. An example of such strategy can be seen in the special issue of *Writer* itself, where the authors were all presented with sets of pictures of themselves that accentuated traits such as Wei Hui's more “classic” background and Mian Mian's rebel nature.

The promotion by the male intellectuals spurred debates on the controversies of the Beauty Writers' topics, which continued to follow the authors throughout their careers. Despite selling great numbers

⁹ Zong, R. (Ed.) (1998). Qishi niandai chusheng de nüzuojia xiaoshuo zhuanhao [七十年代出生的女作家小说专号, Special issue on the novels of women writers born in the 1970s]. *Zuojia zazhi*, 353 (7).

of their first books, the government of the PRC banned most of the authors' works, deeming them unfit for publication under several charges, such as "decadence" or "spiritual pollution". While the ban persisted on paper for more than a decade, in reality it helped popularise the image of the authors on the media, both in China and abroad. Copies were circulated in their motherland on the black market and on internet, while Wei Hui's and Mian Mian's main books (*Shanghai Baby* and *Candy*, respectively) have been published abroad under the label of "banned in China", thus becoming best sellers. The young authors stirred sensation both for the topics of their stories and for their real-life public deeds, such as Wei Hui allegedly bearing her breasts at a conference, the act that would be the reason why the Chinese government decided to ban her works (Knight 2003: 640).

As far as the tropes of the Beauty Writers' stories are concerned, all the authors published in the special issue of *Writer* share some similar traits as persons and literature producers, which go beyond being born in the same decade. Their similar traits, moreover, are mirrored in their works and their protagonists, who are often a representation of the authors themselves. Being born in an era of economic and urban boom, their stories are set on the background of bustling growing cities, with descriptions of ever-changing surroundings that sometimes render the city almost like an entire individual character, rather than just a background setting for human stories. In these cities, new neighbourhoods and skyscrapers are born almost overnight, intermingling with fascinating old remnants of a past that seems more distant than it really is. The young humans extricating themselves in such environments are entangled in the atmosphere of the city, which they explore in an attempt to discover their own selves. For the protagonists of the Beauty Writers, exploration and discovery often have to do with sex and individual desire. This expression of unapologetic desire coming from women who feel sexually liberated has probably created the most stir as far as Chinese official state censors are concerned, but it is also the reason why the Beauty Writers are considered a breakthrough in Chinese literature by their most approving critics.

The novelty of the Beauty Writers, therefore, is a mixture of new stories and an unprecedented public gaze on the real authors' lives, a mixture that is reflected in the fact that most of the Beauty Writers' books are semi-autobiographical tales, playing on what is real and what is fiction. The media and the authors played along, dramatising their relationship and giving the audience not just literary intellectuals, but scandalous celebrities to follow. Because of their stories and their public personas, despite being only a decade-long phenomenon the Beauty Writers have influenced a new generation of young female authors in China, of whom Chun Shu is probably the foremost representative. These younger authors have undoubtedly taken inspiration from the Beauty Writers' audacity of topics and

tales, but they have gone further and deeper in the exploration of themselves. The authors born in the 1980s are more politically conscious and less vain, they do not necessarily idolise the city as a whole independent being, because they were born right after the period of the extremely fast urbanisation of the 1970s (Scheen 2006), therefore the city is not representative of all their internal changes and struggles anymore. In a way, writers like Chun Shu are still considered to be part of the Beauty Writers category, because of their common sets of stories, topics and similarities in the protagonists' experiences. However, the greatest difference between the two generations plays at the real-life level, rather than on the fictional works' side. While the authors born in the 1970s continued to display a certain desire for material wellbeing and, despite the bans and the censorship's uproar, kept defining themselves as non-political, the authors born in the 1980s have shown actual and active criticism towards some parts of the Chinese system in which they find themselves.

The sensational period of the Beauty Writers ceased around the end of the decade 2000s, when the authors and their works became naturalised as part of the mainstream culture of contemporary China in the new millennium. The situation calmed down for a series of reasons, which include both the normalisation of the earlier topics narrated by the Beauty Writers thanks to their most widespread presence and circulation in the PRC, as well as a softening of topics within the Beauty Writers community itself. The last books published by the formerly irreverent authors have, in fact, much softer tones. Sparks of the former lust for life can still be found, but the stories play on safer grounds, bringing the protagonists at peace with themselves, their spirituality, their sexuality and, ultimately, their native land.

1.1. Mian Mian – The rebel

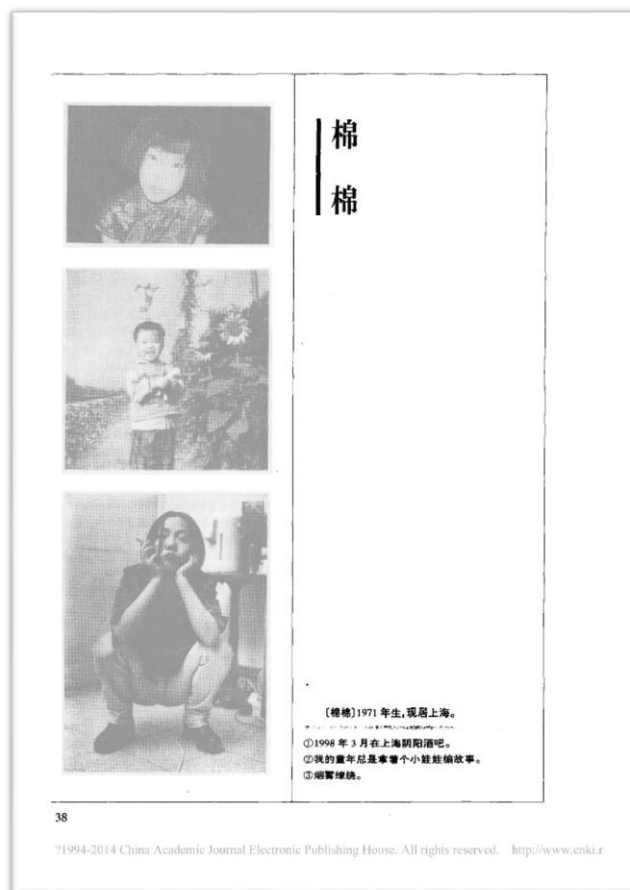


Figure 2. Mian Mian's photographs in *Writer* magazine's special issue, July 1998. Adapted from "Qishi niandai chusheng de nüzuojia xiaoshuo zhuanhao" [七十年代出生的女作家小说专号, Special issue on the novels of women writers born in the 1970s], by Zong, R. (Ed.), 1998, *Zuojia zazhi*, 353 (7), p. 38.

Born in Shanghai in 1971 in a middle class intellectual family, Mian Mian (pseudonym of Wang Xin (Ferry 2003: 661), 王莘) started writing stories and poems at the age of sixteen. Despite her family's intellectual background, she has always been considered a rebel, dropping out of high school when she was seventeen years old and subsequently leading a dissolute life in the fast-developing urban environments of Shanghai and Shenzhen.

She grew up amidst the period of the reform and opening up policies started by President Deng Xiaoping in 1972, which began to open China up to the outside world after the Maoist period. This opening up prompted a fast export-led economic growth, which favoured industrialisation and urbanisation. The urban landscape of cities such as Shanghai flourished rapidly, invaded by Western

commodities new to China, while other urban realities such as Shenzhen rose out of a previously neglected land to function as the export- and investment-fostering “Special Economic Zones”. People who grew up in the rich urban centres at the time experienced luxuries and a wellbeing that few Chinese people had seen in the Maoist era. This was the environment in which Mian Mian came to mature as a writer. The patterns of her stories revolve around dark urban spaces, nightclubs and boudoirs. Her characters are youthful but wasted, and struggle to find a place for themselves in this fast-changing environment, often falling in circles of alcohol and drug abuse in order to cope with the sense of perdition they see around themselves. She recounts detailed tales of prostitution and homosexuality, but the drugs and suicidal tendencies cover an important part in her novels because of her own personal experiences with them. In fact, after leaving Shanghai for Shenzhen in her teen years, she herself became a heroin addict, recovering only with the help of her wealthy family when she came back to her native city. To her own admission, writing was a foremost part of her recovery. All these reasons combined made her a true novelty in the Chinese literary scene, particularly because she was the first modern writer to describe in detail China’s urban drug culture.¹⁰

Mian Mian’s first published work was a collection of stories titled *La La La* (啦啦啦, 1997). The story that lends its name to the collection functions as the core of the author’s first full-length novel, *Candy* (糖 *Tang*, 2000). *Candy* is a passionate semi-autobiographical account, which follows protagonist Hong in Shanghai and Shenzhen, through drug abuse, prostitution, a toxic love and sexual exploration, until she comes back to her family house and starts her recovery through writing, just like the real author did. However, unlike younger Chun Shu who wrote her novel in her teens, when she was still living the stories she recounted, Mian Mian was able to explore her younger self through her novel when she was already in her late 20s. When she told the life of Hong, she was not a heroin addict anymore and could talk about drugs in an abstract way (Shao 2008: 16), helping in some way to exploit her past sufferings in order to become popular, a full-fledged celebrity. Her celebrity status is reflected in her public and online appearances, which made her popular alongside former friend Wei Hui probably more than her own book, which was in fact banned in mainland China in April 2000. The rivalry between the two and the public quarrels that ensued were due to the fact that Mian Mian accused Wei Hui of plagiarising *La La La*, using her characters and settings depriving them of all the sufferings and pain, and making them fashionable and popular.

¹⁰ Loewenberg, A.S. (2004, January 28). “Best-selling Gen X novelist Mian Mian exposes youth drug culture in changing China” in *SF Gate*. Retrieved from <http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Best-selling-Gen-X-novelist-Mian-Mian-exposes-3180115.php>

However, Mian Mian kept being under the public eyes also for other reasons. She became an event organiser, an actress and an art exhibitor. She made headlines in late 2009 again, when she sued research engine Google for illegally scanning copies of her books and uploading them in its Google Books section. She participated in a documentary directed by Ben Lewis about Google's project of creating the world's largest library,¹¹ but she also spoke in documentaries about China's new cultural scene.¹² She starred as one of the protagonists in the independent movie *Shanghai Panic* (我们害怕 *Women Haipa*, 2002), based on her own novel *We Are Panic* (我们害怕 *Women Haipa*, 1998), but she also had a role in the internationally acclaimed Wayne Wang's movie "Snow Flower and the Secret Fan" (2011).

Despite her numerous appearances in front of the cameras, she has not written since 2009, when she published her last work *Oath* (誓言 *Shiyan*, 2009). Another of her novels needs a special mention, though: *Panda Sex* (熊猫 *Xionghao*, 2005). Her second-to-last book offers the first different perspective of what was once a "cruel youth". The author, in fact, has changed and grown up for her own admission,¹³ having written this book at the more mature age of 35 years old. After the passionate accounts of murky sexual relationships of *Candy*, the protagonist of *Panda Sex* decides to live without sex at all, as well as without alcohol and drugs, the panda in the title symbolising abstinence because of the real animal's scarce sexual habits. The public and international press have praised Mian Mian for having grown up and matured, so much that the Chinese government decided in 2009, the same year of *Oath's* first publication, to lift the ban on the author's works and republish them all, in collections as well as full-length novels. The title of *Panda Sex* was changed to *Notorious* (声名狼藉, *Shengminglangji*) and her books were widely promoted in Shanghai (Scheen 2015).

¹¹ Lewis, B. (Director). (2013). *Google and the World Brain* [Documentary]. Polar Star Films, BLTV.

¹² Scagliola, Y. (Director) and Weber, R. (Producer). (2002). *Made in China* [Documentary].

¹³ "Mian Mian reaches maturity with 'Panda Sex'" (2005, March 1) in *China Daily*. Retrieved from http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-03/01/content_420714.htm

1.2. Wei Hui – Intellectual babe

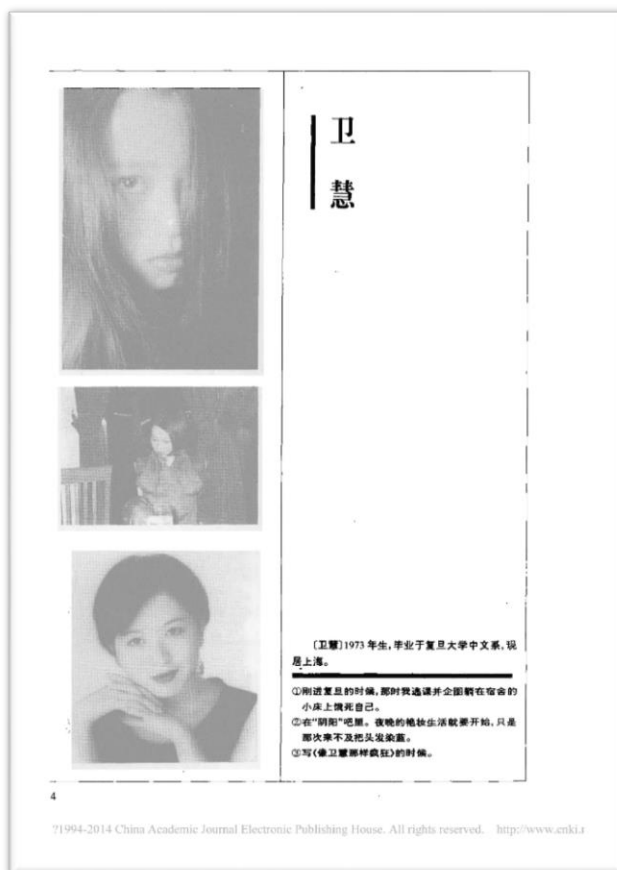


Figure 3. Wei Hui's photographs in *Writer* magazine's special issue, July 1998. Adapted from “Qishi niandai chusheng de nüzuojia xiaoshuo zhuanhao” [七十年代出生的女作家小说专号, Special issue on the novels of women writers born in the 1970s], by Zong, R. (Ed.), 1998, *Zuojia zazhi*, 353 (7), p. 4.

Wei Hui was born Zhou Weihui in Ningbo in 1973 in a high-grade military family. Before starting her university education at the famous Fudan University in Shanghai, which she often remembers in her works and interviews, she was forced by her family to undergo a year of military training. She is the most famous representative of the literary group that goes by the name of Beauty Writers and exemplifies the definition of the *Xinxin renlei* culture producers, representing and displaying her desire for material wellbeing and a glamorous lifestyle. Wei Hui debuted, together with rival Mian Mian and a number of other Beauty Writers, in the literature magazine *Writer*, promoted for the first time through the use of explicit photographs which showed them off physically, rather than as cultural figures. The term 美女作家 (*Meinü Zuojia*), or “Beauty Writer”, was coined by Wei Hui herself in the

same issue of the magazine (Yang 2011: 3), and subsequently became the conventional word to describe this group of female writers, rendering her inextricably linked to the category.

Wei Hui started producing prose in her 20s, publishing a first collection of short stories titled *Pistol of Desire* (欲望的手枪, *Yuwang de Shouqiang*) in 1998. However, she rose to stardom with her first novel, *Shanghai Baby* (1999), especially when this was banned in China in the year 2000 and was subsequently published abroad and advertised as a controversial challenge to the Chinese government. In reality, Wei Hui and the other Beauty Writers born in the 1970s have been vocal about their being apolitical,¹⁴ in fact their aim was not that of challenging the Chinese government or society, but rather express themselves, their inner feelings and desires. Wei Hui in particular has been criticised for being superficial, materialist and too sexualised, even pornographic. The protagonist of her debated novel, Nikki (who goes by the name of Coco in memory of stylist Coco Chanel), is a 25-year-old woman who has an impotent Chinese lover and explores a sexual relationship with a German businessman, on the backdrop of the night cityscape of cosmopolitan Shanghai. Criticised as pornographic in China, and for this reason advertised as highly controversial in the West, in reality the sexual depictions in *Shanghai Baby* are not at the forefront of the novel. They serve the purpose of exploring Coco's own identity, and they are only secondary to the love dimension. The exploration of Coco's inner identity continues in Wei Hui's second novel, *Marrying Buddha* (我的神, *Wo de Shen*), published in 2005 also in her motherland, though censored and modified in some parts (Berg 2010: 320). *Marrying Buddha* describes the rediscovery of Coco's spiritual self, with her conversion to Buddhism and let go of materialist desires, though not before having gone to New York to pursue her own American dream. The protagonist Coco is a disguised Wei Hui, recognisable in the novels through hints at the author's real life: her real unsuccessful move to the USA,¹⁵ her conversion to Buddhism, but before this, in *Shanghai Baby*, the description of real moments that recount the process of her writing the novel, as well as her work as a waitress. The story of Coco has been made into an eponymous movie in 2007, cementing the success of Wei Hui not just as a writer, but as a full-fledged celebrity.

¹⁴ Loewenberg, A. S. (2004, January 28). "Best-selling Gen X novelist Mian Mian exposes youth drug culture in changing China" in *SF Gate*. Retrieved from <http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Best-selling-Gen-X-novelist-Mian-Mian-exposes-3180115.php>

¹⁵ Wei Hui: *Marrying Buddha* [Promotional Video] (n.d.). Meet the Author. Retrieved from <http://www.meettheauthor.com/bookbites/827.html>

Wei Hui's last work is a novel published in 2007, *Dog Dad* (狗爸爸, *Gou Baba*), which breaks away from Coco's life, exploring the protagonist's nostalgic comeback to a former love.¹⁶

Probably because she is the most famous amongst the Beauty Writers, both in China and abroad, Wei Hui has been subject to harsh criticism in both literary environments. At home, a few critics have praised her honesty in the description of Coco's innermost desires, but others have attacked her shallowness in recounting what today's China is, pointing out how *Shanghai Baby* seems to be based on Western clichés, defining therefore that "the problem in her work is not its honesty but its superficiality" (Gu 2005: 40). Her redemption with *Marrying Buddha* has only been half-hearted, since, in order to be published, her work has been changed and censored. In the West, too, after the novelty of the publication of a work that sported the capital-lettered banner "banned in China", readers have started to complain about the same shallowness and superficiality, and the movie based on the book has not had success. However, the legacy of *Shanghai Baby* and her author is not to be seen on the aspect of the shallowness of contents. The book has paved the way for the normalisation of sexual talks and accounts, has opened up a space for women writers, as well as bloggers and readers, to recount their private experiences and disclose their feelings and desires. This characteristic is especially present in the reviews of a special category of readers, namely young urban women readers. Moreover, it had an impact on what would have developed to be the internet literature in China (Lu 2008: 167), with new Chinese women writers who, for better or worse, compare to her, making her an important figure in modern Chinese literature.

The author has not written any novel or participated in any project since the publication of *Dog Dad* in 2007.¹⁷

¹⁶ Li, X. (Ed.) (August 14, 2007). "'Shanghai baobei' Wei Hui yuanman de shuo zaijian" ["上海宝贝" 卫慧圆满地说再见 "Shanghai Baby" Wei Hui satisfactorily says goodbye] in *Xinhua*. Retrieved from http://news.xinhuanet.com/book/2007-08/14/content_6528700.htm

¹⁷ Li, X. (Ed.) (August 14, 2007). "'Shanghai baobei' Wei Hui yuanman de shuo zaijian" ["上海宝贝" 卫慧圆满地说再见, "Shanghai Baby" Wei Hui satisfactorily says goodbye] in *Xinhua*. Retrieved from http://news.xinhuanet.com/book/2007-08/14/content_6528700.htm

2.3. Chun Shu – Beauty Writer of a *newly new generation*



Figure 4. Chun Shu's *Time Asia* cover. Adapted from *Breaking Out: Feb. 2, 2004*, 2004, retrieved from <http://content.time.com/time/covers/asia/0,16641,20040202,00.html>

Differently from Mian Mian and Wei Hui, Chun Shu (pen name of Lin Jiafu 林嘉芙 (Hillenbrand 2009: 734), known in the West also as Chun Sue), was born in the province of Shandong in 1983 in a military family, part of a generation of young people known in China as Post-80's Generation. Characteristics of people born in this decade, already after the economic boom caused by the reform and opening up policy set up by President Deng Xiaoping, are the widespread wellbeing and materialism, which pervade every aspect of life and show through their works.

Chun Shu's first semi-autobiographical novel, *Beijing Doll*, was published in 2002, just a few years after the works of older Wei Hui and Mian Mian. When the book was published, the author was still a teenager who was exploring her sexual life and relationships in the underground music scene of the

Chinese capital. Being ten years younger than the first Beauty Writers and publishing a book opening up her inner experiences at such a young age denotes the deep impact that the previous authors had in the younger Chinese urban generation. Her young age shows through her work, both in her writing style and in the innocence and naivety of her protagonist. Chun Shu's writing style and position towards the public were reminiscent of Mian Mian's, the rebel girl who did drugs and wandered the sordid underground night scenes in Shenzhen. She shares with Mian Mian another fundamental similarity, the fact that both dropped out of school at the age of seventeen, contrary to the graduate Wei Hui who poses herself at a different level because of her education. At the same time, Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby* did indeed inspire the title of Chun Shu's debut work. Despite the similarities, this new generation of youngsters went further than the *Xinxin renlei* of the youth born in the '70s. In the Chinese subcultural scene they were associated with the *linglei* (另类), which in Chinese means "alternative" and describes the lifestyle of young adults whose interests are different from the mainstream culture: these can range from the underground music scene to more philosophical stances, such as being able to choose one's personal lifestyle without being forced to follow a pre-determined pattern. Chun Shu's own view of the *linglei* scene offers a perspective that helps explain the perceived difference between this generation and the '70s-born predecessors: "People born in the 1970s are concerned about how to make money, how to enjoy life. But people born in the 1980s care more about self-expression, how to choose a path that fits one's own individual identity".¹⁸ Because of her self-proclaimed alternative status, she was even chosen, together with other representatives of the Chinese *linglei* youth in different fields, such as hacker Man Zhou (满舟) and punk rock musician Li Yang (李阳), as a cover story for the February 2004 Asian issue of the American magazine *Time*, which praised them for "daring to be different" and called them China's new radicals (Beech 2004).

Amongst the three writers I have decided to analyse, Chun Shu is probably the less known in the West, though she has published quite a number of books as well as edited a poetry collection of the 1980s. Her latest book, *Journey Around the World: Chun Shu's Travelling Notes* (在地球上: 春树旅行笔记, *Zai Diqiu Shang: Chun Shu Lüxing Biji*), dates back to 2013, representing a career in writing about five years longer than Wei Hui and Mian Mian, whose last books date back respectively to 2007 and 2009. The themes of Chun Shu's works revolve around the lives of young people in urban China, especially the capital Beijing, their lonely exploration of their selves and their personal growth. Often the life of her protagonist is her own life and personal experiences, again blurring the boundaries between reality

¹⁸ Zhao, C. (2010, July 30) "From Punk to Environmentalist – The Return of Chun Shu" in *Women of China*. Retrieved from <http://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/html1/people/writers/10/8535-1.htm>

and fiction. The reader often explores the stories in the form of diaries, which are able to convey even more the impression of the life of a real person, rather than an invented character. In more recent years, the author's themes have extended to other tropes, such as experiences of travelling and exploration of the outside world, as well as poetry and political arguments. Because of such a growth in her stories' topics and writing style, Chun Shu has also been named a "grown up doll",¹⁹ symbolising her evolution as a person and writer.

After her involvement with more mature themes, the Chinese public and literary environment have found a new acceptance for her in the literary world. In fact, her first two books, *Beijing Doll* and *Fun and Games* (长达半天的欢乐, *Changda Bantian de Huanle*), were originally banned in her home country because of supposedly "unhealthy contents",²⁰ a term used to mean sexual representations and alternative lifestyles, but were re-published at the beginning of the 2010s. The All-China Women's Federation, the official CCP-established organisation for women's rights and affairs, has written about Chun Shu in positive terms, branding her as "indeed a representative of the China's 1980s generation",²¹ thus including her amongst the important Women of China. This inclusion is crucial in understanding how her role and acceptance in her motherland have changed, from her previously banned and controversial works to a status of a role model for women in China.

Establishing the context on the Beauty Writers is necessary in order to understand their works, as well as the reasons that caused their reception and different kinds of reviews. The following chapter will briefly focus on one of the most important and most talked-about features of the Beauty Writers' novels, their attachment to their city and the personification of certain urban environments, which prompted the characterisation of the cities as proper characters in the novels. After that, I will set up to examine the reviews and discuss in details the novels' reception.

¹⁹ Zhang, L. (2010, July 21). "Grown-up doll" in *Global Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.globaltimes.cn/special/2010-07/554572.html>

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Zhao, C. (2010, July 30) "From Punk to Environmentalist – The Return of Chun Shu" in *Women of China*. Retrieved from <http://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/html1/people/writers/10/8535-1.htm>

Chapter 2: The city as a character

One of the most noteworthy features in the Beauty Writers' works is the prominence of the city and its importance in the lives of the protagonists, as well as the inspiration the respective cities gave to the writers themselves. The city becomes not just the setting of the stories, but is portrayed with almost personified, humanised characteristics. Sometimes, the moving to different cities also means an important personal change for the protagonists of the Beauty Writers' stories, as happens when Hong moves to Shenzhen and then back to Shanghai in *Candy*, or when Wei Hui's Coco expatriates to New York City. Mian Mian has been most prolific in her representations of Shanghai, providing what can be comparable to a written map of the city in *Panda Sex*, where she makes a list of the most noteworthy spots of the city at the end of the book, featuring places such as art galleries, clubs and similar venues. While reading the Beauty Writers' books, it seems almost impossible to extricate the cities from the stories themselves, since they intermingle with the growing-up process of the protagonists. Some locations in the cities have a somewhat recurrent role in the lives of the protagonists, such as Beijing University in Chun Shu's *Beijing Doll*, which is featured as the protagonist's favourite spot of the city, but changes in meaning as the main character grows up and experiences the changes of life.

A few previous researches have explored the meaning of the cityscape in Chinese modern literature, such as Zhang Yingjin's *The City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film: Configurations of Space, Time, and Gender* (1996) and especially more recently Lena Scheen's *Shanghai: Literary Imaginings of a City in Transformation* (2015). However, a systematic exploration of the subject is missing and, as far as the three Beauty Writers I decided to analyse are concerned, previous works only cover the city of Shanghai. I have found that Mian Mian's *Candy* attributes great importance to the change of scene from Shanghai to Shenzhen, and then back to Shanghai, with the change in setting symbolising the growing-up of the protagonist. At a certain point, Hong almost attributes her sickness and mal de vivre to the poisonous influence of the city of Shenzhen. At the same time, Beijing's urban environment is missing from previous academic studies about the Beauty Writers, though it features prominently in Chun Shu's works, and is also briefly mentioned in Mian Mian's *Candy* and generally described as possessing completely different characteristics as compared to "the south" (Visser 2010: 193). The cities and their urban environments are perceived to possess fundamental features that are independent from the

people who live in them, to such an extent that it seems that they themselves influence the people with their strong characters, rather than the other way around.

While analysing critics and readers' reviews of the Beauty Writers' works, I have found out how the cities are often mentioned in comments, be it positively or negatively. Readers might be pleasantly surprised to find out about the description of their favourite spots in the city as rendered by the writers and might be prone to leaving positive reviews also because of this. In some other cases, they might recognise patterns in the urban environments of China's fast-developing cities, and identify with the Beauty Writers' protagonists in different cityscapes.²² Critics, on the other hand, have provided a wider range of comments about the geographical significance of the places narrated by the writers, pointing out how the cities described are a representation of a certain culture that sometimes might be oversimplified and stereotyped by the writers themselves, which are deemed superficial (Gu 2005: 40). Among the most critical views, it is possible to find disapprovals of the Beauty Writers' representations of their cities as inauthentic, sometimes even false altogether.²³ I will analyse reviews in more details in the next chapter. In the following paragraphs, I will present an overview of the characteristics of the urban environments in the Beauty Writers' works, since the representations of the cities and their personifications are paramount in analysing the books' reception, by both critics and public.

²² Gua [username]. (2007, March 17). "Wo zhi shi yi ge taozhi de Guangzhou wawa" [我只是一个陶制的广州娃娃, I am only a ceramic doll from Guangzhou] in *Douban Books*. Retrieved from <https://book.douban.com/review/1134929/>

²³ Wu, Z. (n.d.). "Pinglun: Wei Hui he ta de <<Shanghai Baobei>>" [评论: 卫慧和她的<<上海宝贝>>, Comment: Wei Hui and her "Shanghai Baby"] in *East Day*. Retrieved from <http://news.eastday.com/epublish/gb/paper190/1/class019000003/hwz555693.htm>

2.1. Shanghai as a “beautiful woman”

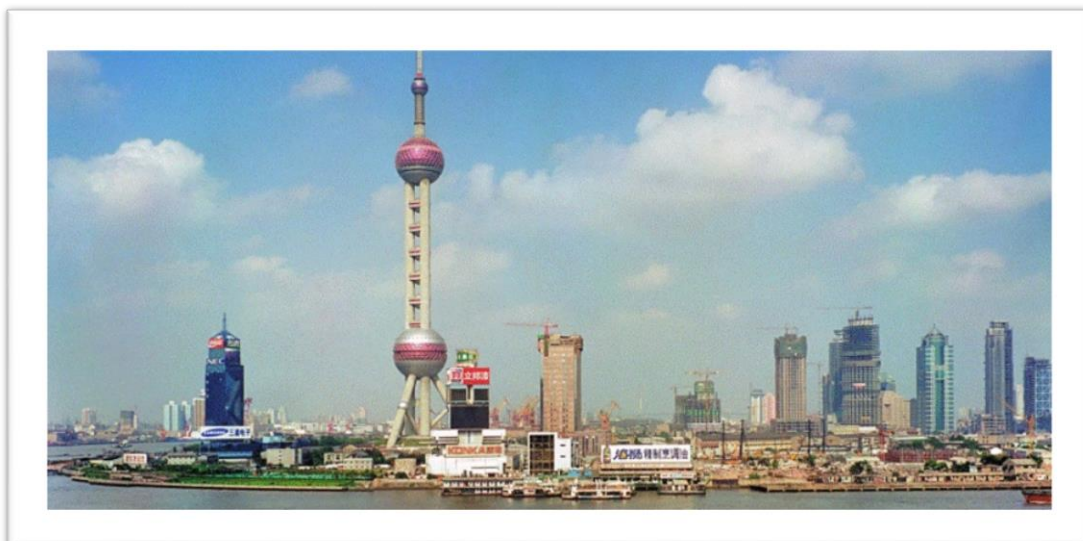


Figure 5. Shanghai’s Pudong area in 2000. Adapted from *Visualising China’s Explosive Growth*, 2010 September 30, by Bob Compton. Retrieved from <http://2mm.typepad.com/usa/2010/09/visualizing-chinas-explosive-growth-.html>

Since the 1920s and 1930s, when Shanghai was China’s international melting pot thanks to the presence of foreign concessions, male intellectuals, not just in China but also all over the world, started to attribute feminine characteristics to it.²⁴ In China, male writers of the modern era coupled the city of Shanghai with an essence of femininity, constructing “the woman as a quintessential figure of the city, and the city as a discursive construct with which to capture [...] woman” (Zhang 1996: 186). More pertinent, however, are constructions of the city by women writers, who started to produce literature at about the same time. A prominent figure among them is Eileen Chang (张爱玲, Zhang Ailing), who wrote her novels in the 1940s and is a relevant figure since she appears to have been a great influence in the Beauty Writers’ production. Her unapologetic desire to achieve fame through literature (Zhang 1996: 242) is similar to the wishes of Wei Hui’s Coco. Her mid-1900s Shanghai, on the other hand, is similar to fin de siècle Shenzhen for Mian Mian, in it being a hub for people coming from everywhere else to do controversial business (Napack 2008).

²⁴ A case in point is the 1932 American movie *Shanghai Express*, based on the novel of the same title by Zhang Henshui (张恨水). The novel narrates the story of a man who travels on a train from Beijing to Shanghai. During the trip, a confidence trickster seduces him, and she is from Shanghai. The novel is particularly interesting because it also contrasts and compares the two cities.

Wei Hui is arguably the most “Shanghainese” of the Beauty Writers, whereas Mian Mian constructs the development of her character through the move to different cities. Despite Wei Hui’s Shanghai being the most sensual, feminine and fun in an unrepentant way, mimicking her protagonist’s attitudes, the city maintains similar features in both authors and, in fact, seems to maintain a character of its own through the writings of several authors, dating back to Eileen Chang herself. Lena Scheen describes Shanghai as a *femme fatale* with predominantly cosmopolitan features, defining its characteristics as “fashionable clothes, open-mindedness, and wild lifestyle – all strongly influenced by foreign cultures” (Scheen 2015: 106). The trope of Shanghai’s *femme fatale* and, consequentially, Shanghai as a *femme fatale* intermingles with representations of modernity, which Shanghai among all other Chinese cities epitomises. Its modernity is also a product of Western influence, which the Beauty Writers often mention in relation to the consumer culture. Modernity, materialism, consumerism, marketisation are all characteristics of the city of Shanghai that are embodied by its women writers. As Lena Scheen again points out, “the cosmopolitan *femme fatale* – whose seductive power forms a constant threat toward men – made her comeback in 1990s Shanghai fiction, [...] characterized by precisely the same features of foreignness and modernity” (Scheen 2015: 110). The self-representation of Shanghai’s Beauty Writers as *femmes fatales*, however, constitutes a double-edged sword. Using sexuality to market themselves, they have incurred negative comments about their superficiality, which some scholars have argued might “undermine women’s literary agency and self-representation” (Ferry 2003: 655). However, this superficiality seems to be again another long-standing feature in modern Shanghai, as Robin Visser notes when he says that “Shanghai urban culture has about it a sense of superficiality” (Visser 2010: 192). In many instances, the Beauty Writers themselves echoed this thought in both their works and in interviews and talks, especially Mian Mian, confirming once again that their Shanghai possesses peculiar features of its own that it has maintained throughout modern history.

2.2. Beijing as a (male) intellectual



Figure 6. Sunrise over Beijing. Adapted from *Beijing Quadrupled in Size in a Decade, NASA Finds*, 2015 June 25, by Carol Rasmussen. Retrieved from <http://www.jpl.nasa.gov/news/news.php?feature=4641>

In contrast to the mostly feminine and modern imaginings of Shanghai, Beijing has not been traditionally associated with female characteristics, let alone compared to a liberated, erotic, beautiful woman. As the capital of the People's Republic of China, Beijing exudes an official aura. It features ancient monuments that belonged to the imperial era, which overshadow in importance modern and contemporary features and buildings. Zhang Yingjin aptly summarises the differences between the two cities, as far the cultural and literary aspects are concerned (Zhang 1996: 26):

Beijing culture is more closely related to ancient (rural) tradition, which favors poetry, beauty, elegance, dignity, simplicity, restraint, and harmony; Shanghai culture is more attuned to modern (urban) civilization, which prefers fresh perspectives, stimulating experiences, exuberant expression, unconventional articulation, and stylistic experimentation.

In the context of the Beauty Writers' works, the city of Beijing maintains such characteristics of a traditional, official and more intellectual space. In Chun Shu's *Beijing*, cultural spaces are predominant, reflected by a discourse on intellectual education that does not appear in Mian Mian or Wei Hui's works. Young Chun Shu's biggest aspiration in the novel is to study at Beijing University, a place that the protagonist mentions and visits many times during the span of the story, though she never manages

to fulfil her initial wish to be a student there. In fact, she is torn between her desire to attend Beijing University and her disdain for the Chinese education system, to such an extent that she decides to drop out of high school.

As far as the different characters of the two main cities are concerned, it is noteworthy to mention that Mian Mian offers a comparison of the two perspectives first-hand. In *Candy*, Hong takes several trips from Shenzhen to Beijing and other northern regions such as Xinjiang, and explains some of the main differences between the north and the south. The differences play out at a cultural level, as well as in the attitudes of the people who inhabit the different regions and are influenced by the exposure to the respective city's atmosphere. People in "the north" are described as having different customs, which make the protagonist feel less of a woman (Mian Mian 2003: 55); in an instance, Hong even mentions a cliché that reinforces the ideal of masculinity in the north, namely "how men in the Northwest like to beat their wives" (Mian Mian 2003: 46). In the first half of the novel, Hong describes the differences between prostitutes of "the north" and Shanghainese sluts, stating how the former conduct their business in a more direct way, speak more for themselves, but are also less cunning, less attached to material possessions and less fake, while Shanghainese girls in the same profession "excel at deception [...] because what satisfies them is a successful lie" (Mian Mian 2003: 38). Among other differences that she mentions throughout the novel, Beijing people appear to live their lives with a sense of collectiveness that strikes Shanghainese as too chaotic, which can be interpreted as a preference that people in Shanghai have for more privacy and individualism (Mian Mian 2003: 70). Another characteristic that plays out in the Beijing of many different writers is the political dimension, which in the post-socialist era is represented also by the subversive music of Beijing rock bands: Saining, Hong's lover and rock musician, is intimidated by Beijing, "[h]e thinks of it as a very political space, where everybody treats music like it's some kind of revolution" (Mian Mian 2003: 87).

Lastly, it is worth to mention that, after the 1980s, Beijing has become a hub for what is considered an alternative lifestyle in China, embodied by rock culture,²⁵ which in some way is what Chun Shu wants to represent with her references to punk rock. Even in this interpretation, Beijing takes on strong, masculine features. Jeroen de Kloet, in his seminal work *China with a Cut: Globalisation, Urban Youth and Popular Music* (2010), describes the distinction between the alternative, counter-cultural rock in the north and the more vapid, government-approved pop music in the south, defining how rock is "authentic, but also subcultural, masculine, rebellious and (counter) political" (De Kloet 2010: 26).

²⁵ Eimer, D. (2011, June). "Rocking out in Beijing" in *Lonely Planet*. Retrieved from <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/china/beijing/travel-tips-and-articles/76677>

Beijing takes on all these characteristics, as an intellectual environment, but also (and perhaps relatedly) a space for counter-cultural reflections, expressed in this case by rock culture.

2.3. Escapes: Shenzhen, New York City and other getaways



Figure 7. Night skyline of the city of Shenzhen. Adapted from *Shenzhen is het nieuwe Silicon Valley*, 2016 March 28, by Evelien De Bruyne. Retrieved from <http://aerey.be/2016/03/shenzhen-is-het-nieuwe-silicon-valley/>

Another category of cities featured in the Beauty Writers' works, some of them as main characters, are the places that provide a getaway for the novels' protagonists. *Candy* is largely set in Shenzhen, rather than Shanghai, with the southern city almost taking on some characteristics of Eileen Chang's 1940's Shanghai: a newly developed city where people of all walks of life flock to in a very short span of time, setting up controversial businesses; a hub for gangsters, gamblers and prostitutes. Shenzhen starts off as a new hope for Hong, who dreams to begin a new life in the new city providing for herself, but instead crumbles under the pressure of a toxic love and the struggles to find out who she really is. The city is seen as contributing to her malaise, if not promoting it, because of the spiritual pollution that pervades it. Scholar Lu Hongwei talks about the relationship between Mian Mian's protagonist Hong and the city of Shenzhen as "Special Economic Zone Syndrome" (Lu 2011: 40-47). This term conveys the struggle of the Chinese youth who flock to the new, fast-developing cities to compromise between their modern lives of consumption and the SEZs' structures of power, and they

do so through the experiences of their bodies. In the case of Mian Mian, this experience is overwhelming for Hong, who finds herself wanting to flee from the city that was her original “getaway”.

In Wei Hui’s case, we see Coco’s escape to New York City at the beginning of *Marrying Buddha*, as a follow-up of *Shanghai Baby*. Similarly to Mian Mian’s Hong, in Coco’s case we see a need to flee from what was perceived originally as a “getaway”. In fact, after the seeming end of a relationship Coco flies back to China, not to the lively Shanghai but to the reclusive Buddhist temple of Mount Putuo. Coco idealised New York City, and when she finds herself in the real metropolis, she discovers it is different from what she thought. The atmosphere of big, cosmopolitan metropolises become too oppressive for her, making her want to flee to a more peaceful place.

As a general pattern in these two writers’ works, the place that is originally thought of as an escape from a previous oppressive situation becomes in some way worse than the first option. Both Hong and Coco find themselves worse off in their getaways, attributing to these cities oppressive and negative feelings. An interpretation of this pattern, however, is that the protagonist simply cannot escape from herself and her tumultuous life, no matter in which city she finds herself.

For the purposes of this thesis, which is the analysis of the Beauty Writers’ reception by critics and public, it is noteworthy to examine the importance of these cities in the novels in terms of how they influence the characters. They take on personified characteristics that affect the protagonists in their life choices, therefore they are often mentioned in reviews as powerful subjects. However, for a more thorough analysis of the city (and of different cities) in Chinese modern literature, more research is needed that falls outside the purposes of this thesis.

Chapter 3: An analysis of critics' and public's reviews

According to Western reception theory and reader-response criticism, examining the reception of literary works by readers (whether professional readers such as literary critics or lay readers) entails taking into consideration the external factors, cultural and historical, that contribute to the judgment of a certain work. This approach gives equal or more importance to the reader than it does to the text and the author, pointing out how the text cannot be an isolated, self-standing work, and that “the belief that we read and interpret without any theoretical assumptions or prejudices is a delusion” (Freund 1987: 16). Readers, in fact, analyse the works they read according to external paradigms provided by the society and environment in which they find themselves in a certain period of time,²⁶ whether they are conscious about this or not. Moreover, the reader and the text interact, and this interaction produces the meaning of a text (Iser 1989: 5).

The concepts explained by a literary criticism theory that focuses on the reader can be applied to the Chinese context as well, where pre-existing ideas about the value of literature play a big role in the reception of literary works, especially among professional critics. Literature in China has been considered an élite art since ancient times, despite suffering from a process of de-elitisation during Mao's Cultural Revolution, in the late 60s – early 70s. After this decade, literature followed two paths: some literary schools and movements, such as the New Era and avant-garde genres, sought to bring literature back to a higher standpoint (Tao 2016: 100), while the process of marketisation in Chinese society brought about the existence of a more popular literature, favoured by the emergence of internet, whose consumption was free and open to everyone (Tao 2016: 102). Literary critics started to consider this more popular literature, driven by market demand, as low literature, to such an extent that the Mandarin term for “popular”, *tongsu* (通俗), acquired a negative meaning (Xu 2008: 69-70). It is also worthwhile to mention that, before the opening-up process initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the 1970s, literature had a precise socio-political function, therefore any kind of literature that did not reference any socio-political or moral model was considered low literature, if allowed at all (Tao 2016: 103). Popular literature that came after that period does not necessarily mention any political standpoint, as in the case of the Beauty Writers, and this characteristic might have influenced some critics, who see the Beauty Writers as exclusively driven by the market laws, influenced by Western

²⁶ “Un approccio critico alla letteratura: la critica reader-oriented” [A critical approach to literature: reader-oriented criticism] (n.d.) in *Letteratour*. Retrieved from http://www.letteratour.it/teorie/A05_critica_reader_oriented.asp

commercialisation and not worthy of serious consideration, because the authors themselves do not engage in serious political discourse. Another factor that might have influenced negative remarks by the critics is the position of women in society. As I have mentioned before, the Beauty Writers are certainly not the first women writers in Chinese history, instead they are part of a continuum of writing women that began in imperial China. However, the Beauty Writers differ from their predecessors in that they put the woman in the story at a more independent level: the protagonist is often a woman who seeks a career, searches for love on her own terms, and is especially unapologetic in her wishes and innermost desires. In addition to the sexual controversies caused by the already mentioned sex scenes in the Beauty Writers' novels, here the Beauty Writers go further and innovate the role of the woman in Chinese society beyond the pure sexual desires of the protagonists, at least according to the views of some women readers, who appreciate the Beauty Writers as a model of liberated woman. According to reader-response criticism theory, readers base their critique of a work of literature on previous experiences and readings, among other emotional factors, therefore we could say that the Chinese readers of the Beauty Writers compared their impressions to previous literature written by women that they might have read. Previous readings form a baseline, upon which readers construct their opinion of the Beauty Writers' works. Reader-response criticism also formulates that one of the reasons that prompt a reader to interpret a work in a certain way is the expectation towards it, which the novel can meet or fall short of (Gerratana 2011: 25). In China, literature written by women should meet certain expectations, such as the interest in socio-political situations that I mentioned above, which the Beauty Writers do not always respect. Thus, we can expect negative criticism from Chinese conservative intellectuals when they judge a work that does not respect their standards and expectations, such as the Beauty Writers' case. Conversely, for the same reason we can expect positive reviews by women readers, who take the Beauty Writers as real-life role models when they change the perception of the role of the woman in Chinese society.

As far as the literary value of the Beauty Writers' works is concerned, some reviewers, both in the West and in China, have pointed out that these authors do not employ particularly innovative writing techniques (Gu 2005: 40; Zaleski 2001: 51). In this respect, however, some young critics, among whom figure the early proponents and promoters of the Beauty Writers such as editor Zong Renfa, have praised the Beauty Writers for their original writing style based on the experiences of the body, in this case the woman's body, called for this reason "body writing" (身体写作, *shenti xiezu*). Together with feminist critics and intellectuals, they see the Beauty Writers as the manifestation of an ongoing social phenomenon, basing their opinions on not only the writing styles, but mostly on the content of the

stories and the meaning such works have with respect to the broader society (Wu 2006: 55). This thesis does not focus on an exploration of the wider Chinese society and societal contexts in relation to the Beauty Writers, however it is important to keep in mind a general idea of the woman's role in Chinese society in order to understand how critics and especially popular readers review the Beauty Writers' works, and why they do so in a certain way.

In the following paragraphs, I am going to analyse the reviews, comments and critiques of the Beauty Writers, written by Chinese professional critics, editors and intellectuals, and by representatives of the general lay public. I will keep in mind the bases of reader-response criticism that I have just mentioned, which explain how the wider context is important in understanding the response to a certain literary movement or work of literature in particular. I propose that the Beauty Writers were the subjects of controversies and harsh criticism, besides heated debates about their works' literary value (or lack thereof), especially in the first period after their appearance on the literary and media scene. However, as time goes by, the sensationalism they caused became normalised in Chinese society, as especially remembered by some reviewers in the category of the general lay public. Another idea to keep in mind is that the Beauty Writers that were such young, controversial authors in the early 2000s are now grown-up women in their 40s, who have published follow-up works and novels with a much more subdued tone as compared to their early works. This difference adds up to the reasons why the Beauty Writers are now a much more normalised category of writers, who do not cause uproar anymore and have been instead legitimately assimilated into the ranks of the official Chinese literature.

3.1. Reception by professional critics

As soon as the Beauty Writers appeared on the Chinese literary scene, at the end of the 1990s, they were promoted and brought to the front by some personalities of the Chinese literary world, especially editors and critics who saw them as a breath of fresh air in the Chinese intellectual scene. On paper, as already mentioned, editor-in-chief of the literary magazine *Writer*, Zong Renfa, together with critic Shi Zhanjun and vice editor-in-chief of the magazine *People's Literature* Li Jingze, were the biggest and earliest proponents of the Beauty Writers (Yang 2011: 20). They decided to dedicate an entire special issue of *Writer* to the presentation of seven Beauty Writers to the world, so the first critics' comments and reviews about them are already present in the issue that officially introduced them to the readers for the first time. Every author in the issue is presented in a separate section, which starts with a small introduction of her writing style and primary characteristics by a critic. Fudan University professor and expert of modern Chinese literature Gao Yuanbao (郜元宝) wrote the

introduction to the section dedicated to Wei Hui, while the abovementioned Shi Zhanjun presented Mian Mian's main features in her dedicated section.²⁷ Even before the heated debates around the topics and personalities of the Beauty Writers, Gao Yuanbao wrote about Wei Hui's characteristics: "Her language is not tough at all, it is even fairly weak" (她的语言一点也不强硬, 甚至相当软弱, my translation). This contrasts with some assumptions that mention Wei Hui's writing as transgressive (Yang 2011: 55) and too strong, especially in her sexual depictions. Mian Mian's description reads as almost the exact opposite of Wei Hui's, when Shi writes that "Mian Mian is a loudspeaker in the city with the volume turned up" (绵绵是都市里一个音量被提高的喇叭, my translation), despite acknowledging at the end of the short text that she still has to reach maturity. The accusations of being superficial and immature have followed the Beauty Writers at the beginning of their careers, though probably Chun Shu is the one who has been considered the most immature, because of her writing style in the form of a diary and her actual very young age at the time of writing *Beijing Doll*, as well as the age at which the protagonist is portrayed.²⁸ The question of the maturity of these authors and their works presents itself again when the follow-up novels of Wei Hui and Mian Mian are published, respectively *Marrying Buddha* and *Panda Sex*. The tones of both writers soften, the protagonists find their spirituality in Buddhism or in self-restraint, and criticism thus follows up in regarding the authors as finally grown up.²⁹ However, at least in the case of Wei Hui, the accusations of boredom or superficiality do not completely abandon her name (Gu 2005: 40). The case of Chun Shu is slightly different, in that her works after *Beijing Doll* are not talked about very much and have not been translated in the West, however the author has undergone the process of "growing-up" directly in the media, where she has been cast as one of "China's new radicals" on the cover story of the Asian issue of Time in February 2004 (Beech 2004). At present times, the three authors are considered part of the mainstream Chinese literature of the 2000s, with Wei Hui (and sometimes Mian Mian as her counterpart) being mentioned in virtually every publication about Chinese literature of the time and Chun Shu being included in the list of influential Chinese women of the CCP-sponsored All-China Women's Federation.³⁰

²⁷ Zong, R. (Ed.) (1998). Qishi niandai chusheng de nüzuojia xiaoshuo zhuanhao [七十年代出生的女作家小说专号, Special issue on the novels of women writers born in the 1970s]. *Zuojia zazhi*, 353 (7).

²⁸ Eng, D. (2004, August 4). "Banned in Beijing: Diary of a bored and spoiled brat" in *USA Today*. Retrieved from <http://books.usatoday.com/book/chun-sue-beijing-doll/r106796>

²⁹ "Mian Mian reaches maturity with Panda Sex" (2005, March 1) in *China Daily*. Retrieved from http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-03/01/content_420714.htm

³⁰ Zhao, C. (2010, July 30). "From Punk to Environmentalist – The Return of Chun Shu" in *Women of China*. Retrieved from <http://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/html1/people/writers/10/8535-1.htm>

Despite a wave of criticism that did not put the Beauty Writers in a good light because of their descriptions of sex, drugs and the innermost desires of the protagonists, it is worth to mention that (Liu 2010: 99)

A heightened preoccupation with sex and desire by the post-70s glam-writers such as Wei Hui and Mian Mian was noticed by certain male critics and editors who invested in the packaging and marketisation of these women writers in what might be regarded as an exploitative manner. This is, in fact, also recognised by publishers and booksellers as a sales point of these glam-writers' novels.

It is arguable that the heated debates that the Beauty Writers caused at the beginning of their careers were, in fact, a marketing strategy aimed at rendering them public celebrity-like personas in the media. The strategy worked well at least in the West, where the three debut novels of the three authors were all published under the slogan "banned in China" or "banned in Beijing", in order to draw interest for what could have caused the ban. Some critics in the West have advanced the ideas that such novels were so successful exclusively because of the interest provoked by this banner, which in their opinion just hid the poor quality of the works themselves (Publisher's Weekly 2004: 39).³¹ In China, according to Jia Liu (2010), "not until 2000 when *Shanghai Baby* was banned in mainland China, did the post-70s writers' works enter critical reception and flood the literary market as well as the internet" (Liu 2010: 99). It is debatable that despite the ban, or possibly because of it, the Beauty Writers gained success and entered the world of critical reception, fulfilling the initial aim of their earliest proponents.

Despite the success that the Beauty Writers had on the market, some intellectuals offered very harsh criticism, namely male critics Zhang Ning (张柠) and Zhu Dake (朱大可), who hold the idea that the Beauty Writers' novels do not respect the standards of Chinese literature and, in fact, are only influenced by market laws (Liu 2010: 101). It is also noteworthy that some male critics, including Zhu Dake, have criticised the Beauty Writers as people, not just as producers of literature. The difference between the criticism of the Beauty Writers as people or authors is not always clear-cut, as in the case of avant-garde artist Zhu Qi (朱其), who criticises Mian Mian for her self-promotion as a person, but at the same time frames his ideas in the form of considerations for the sake of the standards of Chinese culture (Liu 2010: 109). Another very harsh critic of the Beauty Writers as people is Ta Ai, with his *Book of Criticism of Ten Beauty Writers*, who offers insights about the ideas on not only Mian Mian and Wei Hui, who are the earliest members of the category, but also on younger Chun Shu. He expresses severe

³¹ Eng, D. (2004, August 4). "Banned in Beijing: Diary of a bored and spoiled brat" in *USA Today*. Retrieved from <http://books.usatoday.com/book/chun-sue-beijing-doll/r106796>

judgments on the authors he writes about, slamming them as women who use their bodies for monetary gain, and whose literature production is just a way to achieve this target. Ta Ai's book itself has received responses from the writers he mentioned, with Chun Shu taking it lightly and using the same ironic tone that Ta Ai uses in the section dedicated to her, with the same language that speaks of immaturity and a kind of childish attitude (Ta Ai 2005: 18).³²

Other critics, such as the abovementioned Li Jingze, Shi Zhanjun and Zong Renfa, do not agree with the ideas of more conservative intellectuals on the scarce literary worth of the Beauty Writers, purporting that their importance in the Chinese literary scene unfolds at a societal level. They claim that these authors represent the phenomenon of a new generation that has witnessed changes in Chinese society and, therefore, reproduces those changes on paper. According to Li Jingze, the blurred lines between celebrity and literature, the huge presence of the media, the marketisation and commercialisation, as well as the changes in the intellectual world such as literature on the internet, all play a role in the rise to the forefront of the Beauty Writers (Liu 2010: 124). Zong Renfa also claims that "the way in which some post-70s writers become famous [...] is very closely related to their life experiences" (Liu 2010: 128), though he specifies that he believes that the Beauty Writers are the victims of the media, which point at them as beautiful women before regarding them as writers. Another critic who sees this relationship between the beautiful woman and the writer as coupled terms, and the influence that the media or the individual authors had in shaping this meaning, is Xie Youshun (谢有顺). In his view, the Beauty Writers had more agency in shaping their rise to fame as exactly "beautiful women who write" than Zong Renfa wants to admit, "pointing out that blurring the boundaries between the characters' lives in the novels and the writers' personal lives in reality was a conscious act" (Zong, Shi and Li 2000: 50).

In conclusion, professional critics' opinions about the Beauty Writers can be divided according to the personal literary ideas of each critic. Namely, more conservative critics, part of the movements that aimed at raising literature's status after Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution, would give the Beauty Writers negative comments according to their high standard of literature and, furthermore, their ideas of the role of the woman writer in Chinese society. Conversely, some younger intellectuals and feminist

³² Haoming Dou Bei Zhu Qiangqu Le [username "All the good names have been stolen by pigs"]. (2005, June 3). "[Meiti Jiaoliu] Shi'er da meiti zhichi <<Shi Meinü Zuojia Pipan Shu>>, guanchajia cheng ci ju shi muhou you qianzhao" [(媒体交流) 十二大媒体支持《十美女作家批判书》，观察家称此举是幕后有前兆 (Media Communication) Twelve big media support "A Book of Criticism of Ten Beauty Writers", observers say there is an omen behind this move] in *Tianya*. Retrieved from <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-no06-23511-1.shtml>

critics would give the Beauty Writers a higher consideration as an embodiment of the changes that are happening in Chinese society.

3.2. Reception by the general readers and public

The comments of the readers and general public to the three Beauty Writers' works and to the authors themselves can be found in huge numbers on the internet, also thanks to the lifting of the ban on the authors' books during the mid-2000s, which also made it possible to share content related to them on the web more freely. Studying the web can be confusing, because of the sheer number and types of information that can be found on it, as well as questions about its authenticity. In China, the world of literature is widely shared on the internet, especially when books are banned and cannot be published on paper. The internet does offer many hidden virtual places that make it possible to comment on and even reproduce entirely banned works, and despite the fact that such places can be not easy to reach, there have been instances in which discussions on the possibility to find certain works on the web have created uproar. This is the case with Mian Mian, not even on the much censored and controlled Chinese internet. The author, in fact, has sued the world-famous American-based search engine Google for having uploaded her works on its Library section without asking for her consent beforehand.³³ Mian Mian's works, therefore, are very difficult to find in their English or Western-languages translations for free on the internet, making it inevitable for researchers to delve deep in the Chinese internet, where even banned works are pirated in specially-dedicated websites. When researching literature in China, the internet plays such an important role because of the huge number of people who use it for this purpose, which easily exceeds the number of people who use internet for the same function worldwide.³⁴ In fact, many authors in the group of the Beauty Writers and "female writers born in the 70s" started out as Internet writers, such as blogger Muzi Mei (木子美)³⁵ and novelist Anni Baobei (安妮宝贝)³⁶, and only later published their works on paper.

³³ Lewis, B. (Director). (2013). *Google and the World Brain* [Documentary]. Polar Star Films, BLTV.

³⁴ Shao, Y. (2016, April). "Internet literature: A solely Chinese phenomenon?" in *Goethe Institut China*. Retrieved from <https://www.goethe.de/ins/cn/en/kul/mag/20742505.html>

³⁵ Muzi Mei is a journalist who, in 2003, started a blog describing her love affairs and sexual encounters in vivid details, making her subject to discussions and uproar because of the involvement of real people in her stories. She is one of the earliest Chinese bloggers, who promoted the concept of blog itself in China. She has since published part of her blogs on paper, in a French translation.

³⁶ Anni Baobei, known in English as Annie Baby, wrote her first internet novella in 2000, titled *Goodbye Vivian* (告别薇安, *Gaobie Wei'an*). She went on to publish her novels and short stories on paper, becoming one of the richest Chinese writers in the early 2010s.

Thanks to the huge presence of literature in the Chinese internet, it is relatively easy to find comments of the readers both on the writings and on the authors. Comments on the authors and their lifestyles are mostly published directly on their personal blogs and websites, following their own posts. This thesis, however, focuses on the reviews of the works of Mian Mian, Wei Hui and Chun Shu, therefore I will not be scanning the authors' blogs in much details as far as posts about everyday life are concerned, rather I will focus on the comments that I found on blogs (even the authors' websites when they feature sections for reviews, such as Chun Shu's³⁷) and on websites specially dedicated to readers' reviews. When I started researching this topic, I knew of a few Western websites dedicated to literature and readers' reviews and comments, such as the American Goodreads. When I found out that Chinese reviews figure in very short supply on Western social media, I focused on Chinese networks, where I found very similar kinds of formats. The Book Section of the cultural social network Douban (豆瓣), for example, features the exact same type of readers' comments and reviews that I first found on Goodreads. Other sources of information are personal readers' blogs and discussion forums such as Tianya (天涯). Commenters use several ways to review a work they read: on websites such as the aforementioned Douban, they tend to post short comments in which they name the characteristics of the book that struck them most, in either a positive or a negative fashion. Alternatively, they can simply rate the books with a number of stars, usually between one and five. The rating of books is a starting point that can give an idea of how much the work is appreciated by the reading public, however it is limited in that it does not give any insight on the reasons why a novel got a certain rating. Another way that readers use to review literature online is a long comment, usually posted on a personal blog or website, which provides the most information and data. Another type of literature commentary I found on the Chinese internet is in the form of a dialogue between two readers, which is the prominent kind of comment I found on discussion forums such as Tianya. This typology of forums also offer general discussion threads, in which many more people can interact and intervene with their own thoughts. The downside of researching on forums of this kind is the confusion that grows as threads become longer, and topics tend to diverge and deviate from the starting point of the discussion. I am focusing more on the long and short comments on Douban and personal blogs, as well as some dialogues on well-organised forums. I might refer to the rating as the fastest way to assess the appreciation of a work of literature, but I will not focus on that too much because of its limits and the few insights it provides.

³⁷ 春树 Chun Shu. Chun Shu's official website. Retrieved from <http://www.chunshu.org/>

As I discussed in the previous section dedicated to the reviews of professional critics, a background on reader-response criticism can be also useful in the discussion of common readers' comments, since the same considerations about external factors and previous readings that influence the judgement of a piece of literature can be applied in the same way. Furthermore, reader-response criticism theory is applicable to reviews on electronic devices as much as it is to commentaries on more traditional media, such as the press. In fact, as Kuić discusses in an article about the applicability of reader-response criticism on the internet, "there is a congruence between basic critical and receptional theoretical settings about the reader and reading. Everything happens in the mind of a reader" (Kuić 2014: 78). This means that a person who has been used to reading and commenting in a virtual environment will just consider that environment natural, therefore not changing the assumptions upon which the theory of reader-response criticism was originally based. Possibly, the internet has made the readers even more involved in shaping the meaning of a text, thanks to its interconnectivity and possibility for the reader to create as much content as the author, and participate to the active production of a work of literature.

3.2.1. The appreciation of the Beauty Writers' novels on literary social networks



Figure 8. Screenshot of *Beijing Doll*'s page on Douban Books. Adapted from *Douban Books*, retrieved from <https://book.douban.com/subject/1041111/>

During the early steps of my research on the Chinese internet, I found out about the website Douban because of the considerable number of reviews and ratings on one particular Beauty Writer's novel, Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby*. The title boasted more than 3000 people who had either reviewed or rated it, the most recent comments had been written fairly recently (in April 2016, with earlier comments dating back to about 2005/2006) and it looked like a good opportunity as a first step to understand the Chinese readers' opinions about the Beauty Writers' works. During the last months, however, the Douban page about the novel has disappeared, and with it all the comments and ratings. Despite the impossibility to find any explanation for the closure of this particular Douban page, other smaller pages for other editions of the same novel have sprung up on the website.

In general, the Douban pages for the published works of Mian Mian, Wei Hui and Chun Shu offer average ratings, which go from three stars out of five for Wei Hui's *Dog Dad* to four stars out of five for several of their other works. None of the Beauty Writers' published works has obtained an average

rating of less than three or more than four stars, though they might have gotten such ratings from individual commenters, which summed up to the others resulted, however, in a rating closer to the medium. As a general overview of the likability of these three Beauty Writers' novels, it seems that the public did not consider them outstanding, but not completely lacking some kind of worth either. Indeed, the average rating they got is generally higher than the median of 2.5 out of 5. To go deeper in understanding what this worth is and what caused these ratings, as well as what might have not caused better ratings, I am now going to look at the comments of the readers on this website. I should also note that not every rating features a corresponding extended comment: among the 2702 people who read and rated *Beijing Doll*, for example, only 510 left comments thus far.³⁸ For the purpose of this thesis, which aims at understanding the reasoning behind the readers' perception of and comments on the Beauty Writers' works, it is important to look at the most common concepts found in the comments, rather than the statistical or quantitative numbers of the reviews. Using a heuristic approach, I will thus analyse what the readers talked about most and what they found important in the novels.

Currently, after the disappearance of the page on *Shanghai Baby*, *Candy* is the novel with the most numerous reviews, followed by *Beijing Doll*. Two versions of *Candy* are present, the original 2000 edition and a re-publication from 2009. The two, coupled, show a sum of 3565 ratings and 725 comments. Moreover, the second edition of *Candy* displays a higher likability than the first one, with four stars out of five compared to the original's 3.5. Most of the reviews on the three books show a connection of the readers to the books established in their adolescence, therefore there is a lingering sense of nostalgia. Many reviewers comment about the long time they had not heard or forgotten about the novels. It is also noteworthy that the comments on Mian Mian's books often feature a mention of Wei Hui, so it is possible to have an idea about what readers think about her too. Many just couple them together, because they read the books at the same time or because of the same general narrative tropes, however some people also write about them together in remembrance of their public quarrels and joint appearances on the media. The negative comments, on the other hand, focus more on the failed expectations about the vivid depictions of sex and drugs, because of which they tend to label the novels as just plain boring.

In general, Mian Mian and Chun Shu are defined as rebels, punks, rock n' roll personalities and truthful authors, and their negative remarks focus more on their writing styles, described as childish in Chun

³⁸ Beijing Wawa duanping (北京娃娃短评, Beijing Doll commentary), in *Douban Books*. Retrieved from <https://book.douban.com/subject/1041111/comments/>

Shu's case or as chaotic in Mian Mian's case. As for Wei Hui, she is positively considered as a spokesperson for young urban women, though negative comments about her describe her as false and non-authentic.³⁹

3.2.2. The reviews of the Beauty Writers' novels on personal blogs and websites

When looking at readers writing comments and reviews on their personal blogs or websites, it is possible to find much more extended pieces, also thanks to the fact that blogs do not have a limit of characters such as many social networks have. This allows for a more complex expression of a person's ideas and more explanations about the reasons behind a review. As a comparison, brief comments on social networks appear to be much more personal: for example, many people there tend to give a book a high rating because that might have been the first book they read, or because it was the first book that left them with a deep impression, however it is also very likely to find ratings without explanations. This is definitely not the case with reviews on personal blogs, where readers take their time to talk about more aspects of the novels, spanning from personal feelings about it to the writing style and literary worth. Readers' blogs also offer a background on who the reader is: it is not rare to find blogs of professional readers, who then review a novel they read for leisure.⁴⁰ Readers who have a blog about literature are more likely to have a broader literary background, which gives them more means to judge a work, as I have mentioned with the idea of reader-response criticism that readers take cues from previous works they read to interpret following readings.

Before discussing the reviews of the individual authors, it is noteworthy that some blogs and websites offer perspectives on the Beauty Writers as a group, as well as the post-80s writers, of which Chun Shu is often considered part. Literary blogger Xing An (興安) talks about the wider category of writers born in the 1970s and even mentions the post-1980s writers, though he apparently does not attach particularly great qualities to the first group, in which he immediately includes Mian Mian and Wei Hui as representatives of "body writers". In his opinion, the post-70s writers have only occupied a small space in broader Chinese literature, because the writers of the 1960s somehow overshadowed them, and afterwards their works were banned. When they could be published again, the post-80s writers soon replaced them. In his opinion in the post, which he wrote in 2013, the Chinese public is only re-

³⁹ In one of the remaining Douban pages dedicated to *Shanghai Baby*, it is possible to find comments that describe the book as realistic, immediately followed by comments that criticise it as "not having any real perception of life". Shanghai Baobei duanping [上海宝贝短评, Shanghai Baby's commentary], in *Douban Books*. Retrieved from <https://book.douban.com/subject/1789863/comments/hot?p=4>

⁴⁰ "Han Han, Amy Cheung, and Wei Hui – from 2007" (2010, June 29) in *Xiaokang2020* [blog]. Retrieved from <http://www.xiaokang2020.com/wp/2010/06/28/han-han-amy-cheung-and-wei-hui-from-2007/>

discovering the writings of the post-70s generation in this era, when they can finally flourish.⁴¹ Another post, published in 2007 in a website dedicated to literature discussions, *China Writer*, while debating the interconnectedness between being an author and being a celebrity, mentions how critics at the beginning of the phenomenon of the Beauty Writers did not necessarily care about the media representations of the authors in their judgment and reception. This became an issue with the publication of Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby*, but also because of a practice of packaging a product with the good looks of its author that spread all over Chinese society and in the wider entertainment industry.⁴²

Blog posts about the individual authors do tend to focus on their earlier novels, with few reviews about their subsequent works, especially when they are non-fiction, such as Mian Mian's collection of essays *Social Dance* (社交舞, *Shejiao Wu*) or Chun Shu's poetry. One exception is Chun Shu's own personal website, where a section is dedicated to fans' reviews. Fellow poet A Fei (阿斐), a member of the group known as "lower-body" poets,⁴³ wrote a review of Chun Shu's poetry featured on the website, in which he praises Chun Shu's writing as visceral, coming from the body and possessing "the heat of life" (带着生命的热度, my translation). He goes as far as comparing her to Shen Haobo (沈浩波), "the best of the younger generation of poets", asserting how Chun Shu is also an important figure on the Chinese poetry scene, despite the fact that few people seem to give her the importance she deserves.⁴⁴ It could be argued that it was in the interest of Chun Shu (or, possibly, the marketing team behind her website) to publish such positive reviews, however it is also a fact that an important figure in the Chinese literary world gave remarkable comments on an aspect of the writer Chun Shu that is often overshadowed by her first novel.

A common feature in blog posts about the Beauty Writers is readers' recollection of their earlier works even in recent years. In fact, women readers in particular tend to talk about *Shanghai Baby* or *Beijing Doll* rather than the follow-up works of the Beauty Writers, even when they post their comments as recently as 2016.⁴⁵ These posts are generally nostalgic and see the Beauty Writers in a very positive

⁴¹ Xing'an. (2013, June 8). "'70hou" zuojia: Cong ganga zixing dao yangmei tuqi" ["70后"作家: 从尴尬自省到扬眉吐气, "Post-70s" writers: From awkward introspection to the pride of fame] in *Xing'an de Boke*. Retrieved from <http://xingan2013.blog.sohu.com/274779353.html>

⁴² Liu, C. (2007, January 9). "Zuojia mingxing hua: 90 niandai liuxing wenhua beijing xia de yi zhong wenxue xianxiang" [作家明星化: 90年代流行文化背景下的一种文学现象, Celebrity writers: A type of literary phenomenon on the backdrop of 1990s popular literature] in *China Writer*. Retrieved from <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/56/2007/0109/913.html>

⁴³ For more detailed information about the "lower-body" poetry and its authors, see Van Crevel, M. (2008). Chapter Nine. The Lower Body: Yin Lichuan and Shen Haobo. In *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money*, pp. 305-343. Brill.

⁴⁴ A Fei (2016, January 24). "Shi Ping" [诗评, Poetry criticism] in *Chun Shu's Official Website*. Retrieved from <http://www.chunshu.org/?p=337>

⁴⁵ Zhang, X. (2016, February 3). "Shenti xiezu de Wei Hui, dao xianzai wo hai jide na you yan you tui de <<Shanghai Baobei>>" [身体写作的卫慧, 到现在我还记得那又艳有颓的《上海宝贝》], Wei Hui's body writing, to this day I still

way, highlighting how the novels helped the women readers be more confident and learn to express their feelings and desires in their own urban environment, transplanting the experiences of the protagonists to their own cities. I already mentioned how the city is considered a very important character in the novels, and this reflects in the reviews left by such urban women readers, who in some way consider themselves as the counterpart of the Beauty Writers in their own city. It is, therefore, likely to witness the existence of things like a “Guangzhou doll”.⁴⁶ However, in relation to the city and the urban environment, it is not impossible to find negative reviews related to the perceived inauthenticity of the representations of the city in the novels. This happened in particular with *Shanghai Baby*, when a male reader published a report about a book-signature event held by Wei Hui. He noticed some incongruences between the book and the very layout of the city of Shanghai and pointed them out to the author, who refused to acknowledge the difference between her novel and real-life Shanghai.⁴⁷ Male readers’ posts often express a more critical attitude towards the Beauty Writers, especially in the case of Wei Hui, who they consider superficial and devoted to sensationalism.⁴⁸ Indeed, a general tendency in the male readers’ reviews on internet is to attribute the most negative qualities to Wei Hui,⁴⁹ though this is possibly the case because Wei Hui was essentially the most prominent and talked about amongst the Beauty Writers. Indeed, she is also the most talked about by women readers, who tend to give positive judgments. Chun Shu had her share of negative comments right after her literary debut, however the most visible pattern in her reviews is the feeling that *Beijing Doll* was a transitional novel, which helped her grow up and become the woman and the writer she was always supposed to be.^{50;51} Mian Mian is usually the writer with the most

remember that both romantic and decadent “Shanghai Baby] in *Jinri Toutiao*. Retrieved from <http://toutiao.com/i6246994994905743873/>

⁴⁶ Gua [username]. (2007, March 17). “Wo zhi shi yi ge taozhi de Guangzhou wawa” [我只是一个陶制的广州娃娃, I am only a ceramic doll from Guangzhou] in *Douban Books*. Retrieved from <https://book.douban.com/review/1134929/>

⁴⁷ Wu, Z. (n.d.). “Pinglun: Wei Hui he ta de <<Shanghai Baobei>> [评论: 卫慧和她的《上海宝贝》, Comment: Wei Hui and her “Shanghai Baby”] in *East Day*. Retrieved from <http://news.eastday.com/epublish/gb/paper190/1/class019000003/hwz555693.htm>

⁴⁸ Gege Wu de Shuzi [Username]. (2002, September 19). “Liang ge Shanghai nanren yanzhong de “Shanghai Baobei”” [两个上海男人眼中的“上好宝贝”, “Shanghai Baby” in the eyes of two men from Shanghai] in *Tianya*. Retrieved from <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-culture-55371-1.shtml>

⁴⁹ Tang, B. (n.d.). “<<Shanghai Baobei>> shi baobei haishi laji?” [《上海宝贝》是宝贝还是垃圾?, Is “Shanghai Baby” treasure or trash?] in *Tang Ben Forum*. Retrieved from <http://www.tangben.com/JINDUPING/2000/baobei.htm>

⁵⁰ “Duihua 80 hou nü zuojia qunti. Chun Shu: xiwang mei ben shu dou neng baochi chunü zuo de rui li” [对话 80 后女作家群体 | 春树: 希望每本书都能保持处女座的锐利, Dialogue with a post-80 female writer. Chun Shu: I hope every book could maintain the sharpness of the first publication] (2014, August 19) in *Zhongguo Nüxing Zazhi*. Retrieved from <http://dy.qq.com/article.htm?id=20140819A000UG00>

⁵¹ Zhang, T. (2005, July). “Chun Shu: Panni de Beijing Wawa” [春树: 叛逆的北京娃娃, Chun Shu: A taboo Beijing Doll] in *Quan Kan Zazhi*. Retrieved from <http://doc.qkzz.net/article/cfeec392-da49-49f9-a496-1b997d23e1e9.htm>

positive reviews among the three, both about her first book and her subsequent works, as well as her persona in the media.⁵²

The golden era of the Beauty Writers has ended, therefore it appears that the reviews on the internet are converging on a kind of generalised acceptance of the category as part of the mainstream Chinese popular literature. People, especially on cultural social networks, gather to talk about the Beauty Writers because they had heard about them as a phenomenon, as if it was surprising that they had not read anything about them until recently. The period of controversies has passed, and what remains are nostalgic comments about the Beauty Writers as role models for women in society, or surprise about the writing style of the Beauty Writers, especially Wei Hui. After the government's ban on the Beauty Writers' works, which were almost compared to outright pornography, readers expected to find murky novels about morbid sexuality, while in fact the tones were much softer than they expected, and much more about love and the struggles of young urban women in a China subjected to societal changes and globalisation.⁵³ Now that those changes have set in motion and the younger generation of readers is used to them, the Beauty Writers do not strike them as a novelty anymore.

⁵² Skyge [username]. (Ed.) (2008, June 18). "Nü qingnian Mian Mian qianxing yu ai he tong de bianyuan" [女青年绵绵潜行于爱和痛的边缘, Young woman Mian Mian moves on the edge of love and pain] in *Sohu Women*. Retrieved from <http://women.sohu.com/20080618/n257586365.shtml>

⁵³ Cox, T. (2001, June 16). "I have only written a love story" in *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4724116/I-have-only-written-a-love-story.html>

Conclusion

This thesis analysed the reviews of the works of three Chinese female writers who are part of a category of authors known as “Beauty Writers”, a group of mainly urban women writers born between the 1970s and 1980s, namely Mian Mian, Wei Hui and Chun Shu. I offered an introduction to the three writers’ biographies and bibliographies in order to understand what the critics and readers commented about and what their reviews were based on. I subsequently dedicated a chapter to the concept of the city (or cities) in the Beauty Writers’ works, because of the importance of the urban environment in their novels and characterisations, to such an extent that the cities become comparable to individual characters, and are therefore talked about in such a way even in some of the reviews, particularly those concerning the general readers. Lastly, I offered a broad view of the reception of the three Beauty Writers concerned, discerning between reviews of professional readers (a category that includes fellow writers, editors, professional critics, and intellectuals) and of the general readers. Most of the comments come from the internet as far as the general readers are concerned, thanks to the huge development of internet literature in China. Conversely, reviews and articles on and by professional readers come from sources of secondary literature, such as Jia Liu’s *The Reception of the Works of Contemporary Chinese Glam-Writers in Mainland China* (2010), Lena Scheen’s *Shanghai: Literary Imaginings of a City in Transformation* (2015), and Xin Yang’s *From Beauty Fear to Beauty Fever: A Critical Study of Contemporary Chinese Female Writers* (2011).

To analyse the reviews, I kept in mind the theoretical framework of Western reader-response criticism, a literary theory developed by scholars such as Wolfgang Iser in order to make sense of the role of the reader in shaping the meaning of a text of literature. This theory is important as a framework because it implies that the text is not an isolated, self-standing work. On the contrary, the readers are the ones who shape the meaning of a text by interpreting it through pre-existing knowledge, previous readings and especially external paradigms provided by the society and environment in which they find themselves in a certain period of time. By keeping in mind the interconnectedness between the text and the reader, it is easy to understand how in the era of internet literature the reader is even more involved in the creation of the meaning of a text, thanks to the possibility to actively write and communicate with the author and other readers. In the Chinese context, in both the printed and virtual

forms, reader-response criticism helps to understand the reasoning behind the reception, especially when we look at professional critics' response to the Beauty Writers. In fact, previous societal assumptions on the role of the woman and more literary beliefs about the purity or, in this case, impurity of certain forms of literature are some of the reasons that drive a certain response.

In particular, as far as professional readers' are concerned, I found how some conservative critics consider popular literature driven by the laws of the market as low literature, and judge the Beauty Writers negatively because of this, accusing them of being "slaves to Western consumerism". A particularity of the detractors amongst the professional critics is that some of them review the writers as persons and women, rather than only as culture producers. One of the most widely discussed topics, in fact, is the exploitation of the women's bodies and media personas in order to become writers. Negative criticism also mentions the poor quality of the Beauty Writers' literature and inauthentic representations of the Chinese reality. This negative criticism is juxtaposed to some positive comments, offered mainly by younger intellectuals, feminist critics and the early proponents of the group of the Beauty Writers, who see the group as an expression of the changes that are happening in Chinese society, mainly due to the processes of globalisation, marketisation and commodification. They also praise the new writing technique utilised by the Beauty Writers, that is the "body writing", or *shenti xiezu*, that allows the authors to express their innermost feelings through the experiences of their bodies.

As for the popular readers, or general public, I analysed both cultural social networks and personal blogs, as well as some threads in well-organised discussion forums. I noticed two different patterns between male and female reviewers. The former tend to be more disapproving and criticise the Beauty Writers as inauthentic and false, both as persons and in the descriptions of the young people's behaviours and of the respective cities. The latter are mostly nostalgic about the time when the Beauty Writers wrote their earlier novels, and regard them as role models for the liberated woman in contemporary Chinese urban society. When commenting about the literary style, most negative reviews focus on the failed expectation of explicit sexual depictions, or alternatively on the childish and immature nature of some early works. However, most people talk about the authors as an established part of Chinese literature that they need to know and read.

On the level of the consideration of the literary worth of the Beauty Writers, it seems that the professional and popular readers converge on some aspects, such as the perceived immaturity of the protagonists and of the writing styles, which however becomes surpassed in later works of the same

authors, where they are perceived as “reaching maturity”. However, reviews that focus on the content and the meaning of the Beauty Writers for Chinese society diverge. Popular women readers welcome the Beauty Writers as a role model for their own liberation, while professional critics had anticipated that the Beauty Writers would be a representation of the changes that are happening and were happening in Chinese society at the turn of the century. These considerations also tie to the introduction of the Beauty Writers in the ranks of the history of Chinese literature, as a representation of their times and, in a certain sense, of their generation. In conclusion, despite the early heated and varied discussions about the literary worth of the Beauty Writers, in the end they have been normalised both as writers, as mentioned with the lifting of the ban on their works and their inclusion in the history of Chinese literature, and as people, not resulting so new and controversial anymore.

It would be interesting to further develop the topic of the changes in society that the Beauty Writers were part of, since many studies mention this but they do not offer a full empirical research on the topic. Similarly, I have only taken into consideration three of the best-known Beauty Writers in the category, but it would be interesting to also analyse some of the lesser-known members of the group, especially those who took the example from Wei Hui and Mian Mian and started to write later. Are they only imitators, or do they have something original to offer to the literary world? As the era of the Beauty Writers fades off, it should be possible to assess the legacy they left in Chinese literature, if today’s writers reproduce some of their topics or completely separate themselves from them, and what this would mean in the evolution of contemporary Chinese literature.

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Appendix 1 – The Beauty Writers’ original publications⁵⁴

	Mian Mian	Wei Hui	Chun Shu
1997	<i>La La La</i> (啦啦啦)		
1998	<i>Every Good Child Deserves to Eat Candy</i> (每个好孩子都有糖吃)	<i>Pistol of Desire</i> (欲望的手枪)	
1999		<i>Shanghai Baby</i> (上海宝贝) <i>Crazy like Weihui</i> (像卫慧那样疯狂) <i>Shriek of the Butterfly</i> (蝴蝶的尖叫)	
2000	<i>Acid Lover</i> (盐酸情人) <i>Candy</i> (糖)	<i>Virgin in the Water</i> (水中的处女)	
2002	<i>Social Dance</i> (社交舞)		<i>Beijing Doll</i> (北京娃娃)
2003			<i>Fun and Games</i> (长大半天的欢乐)
2004	<i>Panda Sex</i> (熊猫)	<i>Marrying Buddha</i> (我的神)	<i>The Vain Above</i> (抬头望见北斗星)
2005	<i>White on white</i> (白色在白色之上)		<i>Ray of Passion</i> (激情万丈) <i>The Hard Task of Living</i> (2条命世界上狂野的少年们)
2006	<i>How Sensitive We Are</i> (我们是如此敏感)		<i>Her Name is Chun Shu</i> (她叫春树)
2007		<i>Dog Dad</i> (狗爸爸)	<i>Red Children</i> (红孩子)
2009	<i>On High in Blue Tomorrows</i> (于忧郁的明天升上的天空) <i>Notorious</i> (声名狼藉)		

⁵⁴ All titles and publication dates have been retrieved from the *Books* section of the Chinese website *Douban* (<https://book.douban.com/>), which has the most complete collection of Mian Mian, Wei Hui and Chun Shu’s works. For the books that have not been published in English, the titles’ translations most commonly found on the Internet have been provided.

	<i>Your Night, My Day</i> (你的黑夜, 我的白天)		
2010	<i>Oath</i> (誓言) <i>Vanity is an Elegant Flower Adorning Young People</i> (虚荣是年轻人佩戴的一朵幽雅的花)		<i>Light Year's American Dream</i> (光年之美国梦)
2013			<i>Journey Around the World: Chun Shu's Travelling Notes</i> (在地球上: 春树旅行笔记)
Unknown		<i>Gentle Night</i> (黑夜温柔) <i>Moon on the Bed</i> (床上的月亮) ⁵⁵	

⁵⁵ My translations.

Appendix 2 – Brief biographies of Chinese literary critics, editors and intellectuals mentioned in the thesis⁵⁶

A Fei (阿斐): Pseudonym of Li Huifei (李辉斐), he was born in 1980. He is a poet and essayist, part of the group known as “lower-body” poets, sometimes called “the first poet born in the 1980s” and considered as the youngest member of the category. He published his poems in several journals, then went on to become executive editor of the *Annual Report of Chinese New Poetry 2004-2005* (2004-2005 中国新诗年鉴, *Zhongguo Xin Shi Nianjian*), as well as an editorial member of the publication *Ganlu Shikan* (赶路诗刊, or Hurry Poetry).

Gao Yuanbao (郜元宝): Born in 1966, he graduated from Fudan University (the same university Wei Hui graduated from) in 1982, where he now teaches Chinese contemporary literature. He is member of the council of the Chinese Society for Contemporary Literature, member of the council of the Chinese Society of Literary Theory, and judging panel member of the Novel Award. His most important studies are about early 1900s writer Lu Xun (鲁迅).

Li Jingze (李敬泽): Born in 1964 in the province of Shanxi, he graduated in Chinese Literature from Beijing University. Upon graduation he worked for the literary magazine *Xiaoshuo Xuankan* (小说选刊, or Journal of Selected Novels), after which he transferred to the mainstream literary magazine *People's Literature* (人民文学, *Renmin Wenxue*), where he became editor, vice-editor in chief, director, and deputy director of the editorial office.

Shi Zhanjun (施战军): Born in 1966, he graduated from Jilin Normal University in 1988 and obtained a PhD in Chinese from the Shandong University, where he is now Professor of Literature. He is a member of the China Writers Association, executive director of the Chinese Fiction Institute, and vice-president and secretary-general of the Shandong Contemporary Literature Research Association.

Ta Ai (他爱): Literally translated in English as “He Loves”, it is the pseudonym of critic and writer Han Weibing (韩卫兵), born in 1981. He graduated from Jilin University in 2004, he's currently a freelance writer and has a column in the magazine *University Weekly*.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ All the biographies are summarised from the individual authors' pages on the encyclopaedic website *Baidu Wiki*. Retrieved from <http://baike.baidu.com/>

⁵⁷ Liu, J. (2010). *The Reception of the Works of Contemporary Chinese Glam-Writers in Mainland China* [PhD Thesis]. University of York, p. 105.

Xie Youshun (谢有顺): A contemporary of the Beauty Writers, he is a poet and writer born in 1972, graduated from Fujian University. He is a member of the China Writers Association, vice-chairman of the Guangdong Association of Literary Critics, executive director of the Chinese Fiction Institute, member of the council of the Chinese Association of Literary Theory, member of the council of the Chinese Contemporary Literature Research Association, vice-chairman of the Guangdong Writers Association, member of the committee for the evaluation of the Guangdong Movies and Television Production Center, and secretary-general and member of the jury of the Chinese Literature Media Awards.

Zhang Ning (张柠): Born in 1958, he graduated from Shanghai East China Normal University. He is professor of Literature at Beijing Normal University, director of the Beijing Normal University Research Centre for Contemporary Literature and Culture, member of the Fiction Committee of the China Writers Association, member of the academic committee of the China Book Critics Society, member of the editorial board of *Chinese Literature Today* (USA), and member of the editorial board of the *Annual Report of Chinese New Poetry*.

Zhu Dake (朱大可): Born in 1957, he is one of the most prominent Chinese intellectuals and literary critics. He is currently professor at the Research Centre for Literary Critic at Tongji University, professor at the faculty of Humanities of Tongji University, and visiting professor at the University of Sichuan, University of Yunnan, University of Xiamen and the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. He is also the author of a column in the literary magazine *New Century* (新世纪周刊, *Xin Shiji Zhoukan*).

Zhu Qi (朱其): Born in the 1966, he graduated from the Chinese Academy of Arts. He is an art critic and independent curator, researcher for the National Art Theory Department, honorary professor at the graduate school of the World Academy of Sciences, vice-chairman of the committee for the World Academic Renaissance Society, member of the council of the Chinese Cultural Fund, and member of the judging panels of the World Academy of Sciences Award and of the World Renaissance Award.

Zong Renfa (宗仁发): Editor in chief of the literature magazine *Writer*, he was born in 1960 and became a writer in 1979. He is a member of the Chinese Communist Party, a member of the national committee for the China Writers Association, and secretary-general of the Writers Association of the province of Jilin.