## 3

### SEDUCTION

**REPRODUCING THE CITY AS FEMME FATALE**

*Figure 3-1 The covers of Shanghai Babe (left) and Sandbed*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Weihi 卫慧, Shanghai Babe 上海宝贝</strong></th>
<th><strong>Ge Hongbing 葛红兵, Sandbed 沙床</strong>81</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This fun-loving city: the bubbles of happiness that rise from it, the new generation it has nurtured, and the vulgar, sentimental, and mysterious atmosphere to be found in its back streets and alleys. (25)</td>
<td>The Shanghai of 1999 held a nervous, positive, nearly palpable energy; people’s faces were always permeated with an anxious spirit, but it was a positive kind of anxiety. (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The tip of his rum-soaked tongue teased my nipples, and then moved downward. He penetrated my protective labia with deadly accuracy, and located my budding clitoris. [...] I thought I could die and he would keep right on going, but then I climaxed with a sharp cry. (59-60)</td>
<td>My hand wandered from her shoulders over her collarbones, down the valley between her breasts, passing her smooth belly and further down to her pubic hair [...] Now I arrived into her secret core: in the midst of her trembling and shock I felt the deepest vibrations. (27-8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I breathed a sight of relief, lowered myself into the hot water and relaxed. Whenever trouble looms, I hide away in a hot bath. The water is so hot. The mass of my black hair floats about like a water lily. All the memories I recall are happy and lovely. (72)</td>
<td>I’m a cowardly scoundrel who feels safe in a bathtub. (202) When I slowly lowered my body into the hot water, the alcohol vaporized in my body and my head seemed to split open; a stream of sunlight poured in, bringing back childhood memories. (73)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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81 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations come from Ge Hongbing 2003 and Weihi 2001 (translation by Bruce Humes). For the research of this chapter, I used Weihi 1999.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weihui 卫慧, <em>Shanghai Babe</em> 上海宝贝</th>
<th>Ge Hongbing 葛红兵, <em>Sandbed</em> 沙床</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>YY’s has two floors. The lower one, down a long staircase, houses the dance floor. The atmosphere in the room was joyous, full of alcohol, perfume, money, saliva, and hormones. […] They were playing <em>House</em> and <em>Trip-Hop</em>, both totally cool, like a raging blind fire. The more you danced the more unfettered you felt, until you were vaporized out of existence and your right and left lobes were quaking - then you knew you’d reached the peak. (67) When I dance, my mind fills with fantasies and inspiration gushes forth, the result of feeling uninhibited. (68)</td>
<td>We went to a place called ST on Xiping Street. I like the ambience and often go there […] Tonight they were playing <em>Trip-Hop</em>, such a bizarre sound that has the same uncontrollable effect as marijuana, making you crazy, delirious and boiling with excitement. (68) Dancing like crazy makes you indulge in a train of thoughts. It’s always when I’m on this edge of madness that I hear an inner song, a rhapsodic and passionately played melody […] making me believe that life could stop right there or begin anew, and that absolutely nothing matters. (69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This street, which features in all the guidebooks to Shanghai for overseas visitors, follows international fashion closely, and prices are cheaper than anywhere else. […] Whenever I’m feeling down, like other girls I go to Huating Road, stroll from one end to the other, and buy up a storm. (85)</td>
<td>[…] whenever we passed Häagen-Dazs, Xiaomin would say we had to go in and enjoy a foreign sorbet; passing O’Malley’s, we had to taste a pint of world-renowned Irish Guinness; while passing the Sea King Restaurant, both ladies would agree the Australian abalone tasted the best […] (191)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This torment made me understand why in the film <em>Burned by the Sun</em> Aleksander chooses to die in a bath. (90)</td>
<td>Listening to their conversation, I was suddenly reminded of a passage at the end of Camus’ <em>The Plague</em> […] (185)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our lives are short and bitter and romantic dreams leave no trace. (25)</td>
<td>Time is forever, the universe is eternal, only life is short. (33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither music nor drink nor sex could save me. I just lay there in the heart of darkness like one of the living dead […] (107)</td>
<td>I’m using alcohol, music, and various girlfriends to cover up my inner sense of dread. (145)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[After sex] When I sat up to get dressed, I was draped in depression. (61)</td>
<td>[After sex] My heart was in a black wilderness, without a single guiding light to show the way. (162)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A feeling of emptiness which I can never dispel […] (100)</td>
<td>There is no love that can break through my emptiness. (84)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The semi-autobiographical novels *Shanghai Babe* (1999)\(^{83}\) by Weihui (b. 1970) and *Sandbed* (2003) by Ge Hongbing (b. 1968) are both set in 1999 Shanghai, portraying a globalizing city in the midst of commercialization and sexual liberation. The novels largely take place in bars, nightclubs, bathrooms and bedrooms, making the city a sexualized space of intoxication and temptation that functions as a playground

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\(^{82}\) The words ‘Trip-Hop’ and ‘House’ are written in English in the original text. For social studies on bars and nightlife in Shanghai, see particularly the works of Bao Yaming 包亚明 (2001), Farrer (2002), and Field (2010).

\(^{83}\) Translated into English as *Shanghai Baby* (2001) by Bruce Humes. For most translations, Weihui’s pen name is transcribed as ‘Wei Hui,’ most likely because one name is not conventional in the Anglo-Saxon world. Since ‘Wei Hui’ is the given name of the author, I prefer to write it as one name. As for the title ‘Shanghai Babe,’ I have chosen for the translation of ‘babe’ (cf. Kong 2005 and van Crevel 2008), instead of ‘baby,’ because of its sexual connotation.
for sensory experience. Unsurprisingly, *Shanghai Babe* and *Sandbed* both triggered heated debate among (online) readers, critics and scholars. Whereas some regarded the novels’ depiction of hedonism and promiscuity as a blatant celebration of transnational consumer capitalism, others regarded it as a candid portrayal of tensions imposed on the individual by a changing society.

*Shanghai Babe* promptly alarmed the authorities, who labeled the novel a “slave to Western culture […]” burning 40,000 copies and instructing the state-media to never mention the author or the book again because of its sexually charged content,” as Ian Weber (2002: 347) notes. *Sandbed* became subject to criticism from, in particular, the academic world. An established literary scholar himself, Ge Hongbing was criticized by his colleagues for succumbing to commercialism, displaying a lack of morality, and expressing a nihilist attitude to life. Nevertheless, the sensation turned both novels into instant bestsellers in China, and *Shanghai Babe* – translated into 34 languages and having sold over 6 million copies in 48 countries – is one of the most-sold contemporary Chinese novels (Zhu [Hongjun] 2003 and Kong 2010: 137).

*Shanghai Babe* and *Sandbed* are arguably not so much worthy of note from a strictly literary perspective – e.g. their use of imagery, stylistic and narrative inventiveness or sophistication – but rather representative of Chinese fiction published since the 1990s in which “the expressive ‘content’ of literature was prominent and held to be of importance, and formal experimentation was in a comparatively ‘marginal’ position,” in the words of Hong Zicheng (2009: 444). It is indeed the “content” of these novels that caused their controversy and impact on the cultural field. In addition, the authors themselves became targets of attack and personally mingled in the public debates. Just like Nie Wei (2008: 151) remarks on the works of the female Post-1970, these novels are “no longer a purely literary phenomenon, but have become a socio-cultural event deserving to be discussed.”

Below, I will first summarize the careers of Weihui and Ge Hongbing, and the story lines of the novels, followed by the critical reception of the authors and their work. Since the city as sexualized space can arguably be seen as a revival of the 1920-30s trope of Shanghai as seductive *femme fatale*, I will contextualize the said sexualized space in the literary tradition of Shanghai, and follow up with a close reading of *Shanghai Babe* and *Sandbed*. I will then compare their respective protagonists, CoCo and Zhuge, and argue that they are certainly enchanted by the city’s seductive allure, but that their engagement with sex and consumption is primarily a means to the end of searching the self. I will finish with some concluding remarks.

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85 Cf. Chen [Xiaoming] 2002: 200: “As novels of ordinary life became dominant in the 1990s, the problem of how to achieve narrative and descriptive power remained a major concern of contemporary Chinese writers.”
WEIHUI AND GE HONGBING: LIFE AND WORKS

CHAPTER THREE

WEIHUI: CAREER

My novel Shanghai Baby, published when I was twenty-six, met with huge success at first - then it was banned on the Chinese mainland. To date it has been published in over forty countries and was recently adapted for a feature film. Few people would ever connect Zhi Hui, the little girl born at the Temple of Righteous Rain, with the writer whom the Chinese press had dubbed ‘the literary beauty who shatters taboos.’

Weihui in My Zen (2004: 10; translation by Larissa Heinrich 2005: 17)

Weihui was born in 1973 as Zhou Weihui 周卫慧 in Yuyao, Zhejiang Province, and grew up in and around Shanghai. She studied Chinese Language and Literature at Fudan University. Weihui has worked as a journalist, an editor, a radio station host, and a waitress in a coffee shop. From the age of 21, she started writing fiction using her given name Weihui as pen name. Her choice not to use her father’s last name could be seen as a feminist statement against China’s patriarchal society (cf. Lee [Vivian] 2005: 143). Besides Shanghai Babe, she published two novels My Zen 我的禅 (2004; translated into English as Marrying Buddha by Larissa Heinrich, 2005), and Dog Daddy 狗爸爸 (2007). In addition, Weihui has published many short stories in literary magazines. Collections include: Handgun of Desire 欲望的手枪 (1998), Cries of the Butterfly 蝴蝶的尖叫 (1999), Crazy Like Weihui 像卫慧那样疯狂 (1999), and A Virgin in the Water 水中的处女 (2000).

Weihui’s work met with instant success: Shanghai Babe and My Zen became best-sellers in China and abroad. According to Kong (2010: 137), Shanghai Babe “sold over 110,000 copies with seven reprints in a mere six-month period before it was officially banned in late April 2000.” Shanghai Babe was adapted for the screen in 2007, by the German director Berengar Pfahl. The author and her work have been widely appearing on international media, such as The New Yorker, Time Magazine, CNN, BBC, The Times, The Economist, Stern, Asahi, Le Monde, Le Figaro, and Yomiuri.

SHANGHAI BABE: PLOT

In Shanghai Babe, the protagonist begins by saying that her real name is Ni-Ke 倪可, but that friends call her CoCo, after Coco Chanel. She is a young female writer, living in Shanghai with her boyfriend Tiantian 天天, a sensitive and quiet artist. When CoCo meets (married) German businessman Mark she is immediately attracted to him. Initially CoCo assumes this is mainly due to the fact that Tian Tian is impotent, but later she thinks she might be in love with Mark. CoCo’s life consists of writing in her apartment, hanging out with eccentric, artistic friends, shopping and secretly dating Mark. When Tiantian makes a trip to south China to escape his
depression, she is alone for a few weeks, in which she writes, and meets Mark a couple of times. But then Tiantian is arrested and CoCo travels south, where she finds out he is addicted to drugs. Back in Shanghai, CoCo takes Tiantian to a clinic, after which he stops taking drugs and they start living together again. After a while Tiantian resumes his drug habit - presumably because he knows CoCo is cheating on him – and he dies of an overdose. At the same time, Mark goes back to Germany with his wife and daughter. Now that both of her lovers are gone, CoCo devotes herself to the marketing of her new novel.

Ge Hongbing: Career

What kind of a person am I? Dark, useless, crazy, paranoid, immoral, contemptuous, withdrawn, hurting, all these words can be used for me. Me and my body walk around this world, undivided. Every place is my destination and, at the same time, every place is not my destination. Maybe I simply don’t have a destination. I drown in the depths of my body, rotting on the street when all is quiet at the dead of night. I am my own demon. However, I am still alive, trying to live better before dawn, and then better again.

Ge Hongbing (2001a: 34), in My Various Kinds of Life

Ge Hongbing was born in 1968 in Nantong, Jiangsu Province. Born in the midst of the Cultural Revolution when their parents were sent to the countryside to learn from the farmers, Ge and his brothers grew up with their grandparents. He studied literature at Nanjing University, where he received his doctorate in modern Chinese literature in 1998. Three years later, Ge was appointed full professor at Shanghai University.


My Various Kinds of Life was well received by critics and topped the charts of the Shanghai Bookstore 上海书城 for a year. Even though (parts of) the novel soon spread the Internet, more than 60.000 copies were sold. Two years later, Sandbed’s
first edition of an exceptional 50,000 copies was even sold out the first day (Hu Liuming 胡榴明 2003).  

Ge Hongbing is also known as a liberal who regularly participates in political and cultural debates on a wide range of topics. His controversial opinions often turned him into a popular target of attack in the media and/or on the Internet, such as his pro-American stance on the war in Iraq (e.g. Ge 2003b), his accusation that Chinese scholars are “uncritical” toward the works of “the master of half-finished products” Lu Xun (e.g. Ge 1999), his defense of Internet literature (e.g. Ge 2002), and his criticism of history education on Chinese schools, which he claims to be “focused on teaching hate” (Beech 2004).  

In 2007, Ge posted on his weblog an article entitled “China: How Should World War II Be Commemorated?” (later reposted under the title “China’s Purpose in Commemorating the Anti-Japan War Is Promoting Revenge”). In this piece, Ge argued that the Japanese people were also victims of the World War II, and that China should stop commemorating the war in the form of anti-Japan propaganda, but take European views on Germany as an example:

All the crimes committed by Germany can never be compensated by simply ‘falling to the knees.’ Behind forgiving Germany is the victims’ tolerance and understanding. In the end, it is China that should be responsible for resolving the problems between China and Japan. Only China’s forgiveness of Japan can bring real reconciliation between them. My basic opinion is that Japan’s attitudes, no matter what, should not become a condition for reconciliation. I do not mean that we should forget Japanese crimes. I mean that Japan is also deeply trapped by its grave crimes, and the Japanese need our forgiveness.  

(Translation by Guo Nanyan, online at www.japanfocus.org/-Yu-Jie/2654)

The post spawned almost a thousand comments within a week of which the grand majority cursed Ge for his “unpatriotic streak.” Ge’s personal history became the main target of attack, especially his grandfather who was executed as a traitor in 1946, and his father who was said to have named his son ‘red army’ (the literal translation of ‘hongbing’) to apologize for his father’s crimes. After Ge Hongbing’s contact details were published and people called for making phone calls and sending letters to his workplace, Ge Hongbing was forced to withdraw the post and offer an apology. A few people came to Ge’s defense, among whom the Beijing writer Yu Jie 余杰. In his article “How Can We Forgive Japan?,” Yu Jie (2007) writes: “We

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86 According to Hu ([Liuming] 2003), there are only about ten writers in China whose first edition exceeds 50,000 copies. Even the first edition of established authors such as Wang Anyi and Su Tong is around 20,000 and 30,000, respectively.

87 Yu Jie (b. 1973) is a writer and active in human rights activities. From 2005 until 2007, he was the vice-president of the Independent Chinese PEN Center (ICPENC). In 2010, Yu Jie was interrogated by the police after publishing his book China’s Best Actor: Wen Jiabao 中国影帝温家宝. Today, the book is banned, but will be republished in Hong Kong.
must protect Ge Hongbing’s freedom of speech, as it is the first step toward understanding ourselves [...] those who deny this right are no better than the Japanese Right Wing or the Nazi’s.”

_Sandbed:_ Plot

“If all is temporary, everything changes or disappears, then what is the value of all things?” This is one of the many questions that hunt the Christian protagonist in _Sandbed_, whose name is Zhuge 诸葛, with the second character ge being the same one as Ge’s name. Zhuge is a young professor of Western philosophy at Fudan University. In his father’s family, all males suffer from a rare, fatal disease that results in liver failure. This awareness of a possible early death marks his attitude towards the world and his relationships with family, friends, and lovers. Caught up in existential doubts and ‘Christian’ feelings of guilt, he keeps people at a distance and all communication remains strained. At the same time, Zhuge is a successful professor with many well-received publications and popular among students, and he receives an offer to teach at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. He often spends time in bars and coffee houses, joins parties and has several girlfriends. However, Zhuge really prefers to stay at home, listening to classical music, and reading and writing books on philosophy.

Two women play an important role in Zhuge’s life. The first is his student Zhang Xiaomin 张晓闽, who is in love with him. Although they have a special relationship and Zhuge feels attracted to her, they never have sex. The other woman is the widow Pei Zi 裴紫, whom he meets on an Internet forum. When Zhuge gets ill, both Zhang Xiaomin and Pei Zi move in to care for him. After Zhang Xiaomin leaves them to go and live with her new boyfriend, Zhuge’s illness gets more serious. Eventually he is admitted to hospital and asks Pei Zi to assist him in committing suicide. Pei Zi helps him, but also slashes her own throat, and they die in each other’s arms.

**Critical Reception: Selling Her Body and Selling His Intellect**

In *Fictional Authors, Imaginary Audiences*, McDougall (2003: 9) argues:

> Since Chinese authors invite audiences to make the leap from fiction to autobiography, audiences who do so cannot be dismissed as naive; the naive readers, on this account, are Western critics who read Chinese works from a Western perspective.

Whether or not one should read Chinese fiction from a Chinese perspective is open
to debate, but I agree with McDougall that it is important to take the domestic convention of identifying fictional characters with the authors themselves into account. Or as Maghiel van Crevel (2008: 123) puts it:

More importantly, a biographical reading [of Huizi’s poetry] is defensible if not self-evident because Chinese literary practice continues to reflect a biographer, traditional view of literature to this day, even as it vies for influence with contemporary socio-political circumstance and all manner of foreign and indigenous modernities in literature and art.

So, as Chinese readers will often look for clues outside a text, in the biographies of its authors, Roland Barthes’ (1967) famous declaration of the death of the author does not apply to China. Consequently, this literary practice still influences the interpretation of literary works and even their reception by Chinese readers, since, “even nowadays,” as Michel Hockx (2004: 108) argues, “knowledge of the author’s personal circumstances is indispensable [in the eyes of the Chinese readers] in arriving at any kind of appreciation of a literary work.” Moreover, with the commercialization of literature since the 1990s, Chinese publishers effectively exploit the fact that readers associate literary characters with their authors by using pictures of the authors, and biographical fact, as part of their marketing strategy.

In the case of Shanghai Babe and Sandbed it becomes even more important to be aware of this domestic convention, as the novels’ conscious play with the blurring of the line between author and narrator was the chief cause for their controversiality. The deliberate mystification starts with the covers of the novels defining Shanghai Babe as a ‘semi-autobiographical work’ 一部半自传体小说 and Sandbed as a ‘self-narrated biography’自叙传. As Carlos Rojas (2009b: 275) remarks on Shanghai Babe:

This sense of being trapped in a fun-house of mirrors actually describes quite well the way in which both CoCo and the author Wei Hui find themselves sandwiched between layers of fictional identity: between their loosely autobiographical fictional protagonists, on the one hand, and the fictional extrapolations their readers make about the authors on the basis of reading their works, on the other.

In interviews, Ge Hongbing repeatedly insists on the somewhat obscure difference between autobiography 自传 and self-narrated autobiography 自叙传, where the word ‘narrated’ seems to stress that the story is not an objective account of

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88 For interesting discussions on the use of Western theories in readings of Chinese texts, see for example Chow 2010 (chapter 8), McDougall 2003 (chapter 1), and Van Crevel 2008 (54-60).
89 Cf. Wang [Yiyian] 2006: 5: “In the sinophone discourse, it seems impractical and inappropriate to assume a critical stance without considering the biography of the author.”
someone’s life story, but a literary work written from a personal perspective (Zhou [Manzhen] 周满珍 2003: 2). Notably, the various covers of Shanghai Babe all feature a picture of Weihui herself, reaffirming the biographical link with her novel and, arguably, the ‘self-packaging’ of her own body to sell her work.

Another significant example where the Chinese perspective, to paraphrase McDougall, helps for understanding the domestic reception of Chinese fiction is the fact that Shanghai Babe, as Chen ([Xiaoming] 2002: 207) notes, “came under criticism because it was thought that its author had not personally undergone the experiences she describes and was therefore not entitled to write this kind of story.” This was also the main argument that was used by Mian Mian in her catfight with Weihui on alleged plagiarism of her stories collection La La La 啦啦啦 (1997), as well as by other writers and scholars who supported Mian Mian, such as Han Dong 韩东, Chen Cun 陈村, Zhou Jieru 周洁茹, Chen Sihe 陈思和, and Cheng Yongxin 程永新. The bottom line of their argument was that since they believed Shanghai Babe was not entirely based on personal experiences (often substantiated with Weihui’s alleged lack of experience with drugs), Weihui must have copied her ideas from Mian Mian (who had been addicted to drugs). Moreover, if Weihui lied about the autobiographical content of the novel, then the novel itself was also considered not genuine, not authentic, fake, empty or plain garbage. At the same time, ironically, critics who did believe in the ‘authenticity’ of the novel accused Weihui of being an immoral person because of the things CoCo did and said. Ge Hongbing received similar responses; whereas some questioned the reliability of his stories in Sandbed, others (publicly) ended their friendship with him because of its autobiographical content (Xu Gehui 许戈辉 2004).

Let Them See the Breasts of the Shanghai Babe
In April 2000, Weihui caused a big scandal during her Shanghai Babe promotion tour in Chengdu. Her sexy clothing and provocative behavior made her a target of attack in local newspapers, as Zhu ([Aijun] 2007: 141) observes:

The recurring image in the media is a flirtatious Wei Hui in heavy make-ups and low cut black dress showing off her Shanghai baby’s breasts and blowing kisses to her (male) fans while smoking. Most of the news reports focus on Wei Hui’s look, which is seen as ‘disappointing’ in comparison to her pictures. Even when intending to deal with her writing and her thought, the reports never forget to accentuate her superficiality and her desire to show off.

90 According to Wang (Jing M.] 2008: 22), the term zixuzhuan 自叙述 refers to ‘self-narrated biography,’ “testifying to the stronghold of biography” in traditional Chinese literature, whereas Ng (1988: 122) claims that the term is borrowed from the Japanese ‘I-novel’ [jijoden], “a term preferred by Japanese naturalist writers [...] when referring to the very private autobiographical nature of their creative works.”

After one local tabloid published a picture of Weihui wearing a revealing dress next to an article that claimed Weihui had told the photographer to “let them see the breasts of the Shanghai babe” (让他们看看上海宝贝的乳房), the scandal escaladed into a huge national media sensation. When people from the cultural field joined in, Shen Haobo 沈浩波 (2000) wrote his poem “About Weihui” 关于卫慧 in which he takes their hypocrisy to task:

A twentyomething Shanghai woman writer
Very beautiful as well
Is called by the media
Beauty Writer
Because of a novel
Weihui is now very popular
The book’s title is quite dubious
Namely: Shanghai Babe
It is full of
Descriptions of sex
This book is an overnight success
Weihui has become a celebrity
And she even begins to learn
In front of journalists
To change clothes
Saying it is to let them
See the breasts of the Shanghai babe
Another time
When a journalist came for an interview
She was bucknaked
Writing in front of the computer
Are these rumors true or not
For now we cannot judge
But what we know for sure
Is that this gossip
Within so-called cultural circles
Have caused a big uproar
With foaming mouths
They talk about these things
With friendly expressions
As if they are parading
Their own porn show
Or as if each one of them
Has just seen
Those two unscrupulous breasts
Of the Shanghai babe
But when these brothers
Are finished with their chatter
They immediately have enough
Of Weihui’s behavior
Contempt and indignation
Some are bitter
Some are cynical

While *Shanghai Babe* was banned right after this scandal, it simultaneously became a bestseller in China, and abroad, where the label “banned in China” only increased its popularity. At the same time, to complicate things even more, the novel’s commercial success only aggravated the criticism of many Chinese scholars, as “in traditional Chinese culture, commerce is of lower class and would not have been respected” according to the author Chen Danyan (2004), whose work met with the same fate (see chapter 4).

**A Competition in Taking Off One’s Pants**
One year after the publication of *Shanghai Babe*, Ge Hongbing (2000: 108) wrote in a critical article on contemporary Chinese literature:

In contemporary fiction, like in Weihui’s *Shanghai Babe*, it is hard to find life’s weight. I do not argue that there is no life at all in this type of novels, but the life it reflects seems very obscure and from the other end of the earth. In *Shanghai Babe*, we can only find bars, parties, a so-called writer who writes while masturbating, all kinds of unemployed persons, and people from the other side of the ocean, but we cannot find a single real Chinese. […] To what extent can the performance of drinking games and disco dancing represent life in this epoch? To what extent does this content, that directly follows ‘the West,’ whitewash our real situation? […] Why are peasants and workers not a topic in the literary world of a nation with almost one billion peasants and hundreds of millions of blue-collar workers? […] Nowadays, ‘the West’ dominates our living pattern, language and behavior. It is our responsibility to break away from ‘foreign ideology,’ so we can ‘return to our cultural womb’ [回到我们的文化母体中去].

Likewise, in *Poetics at Noon* 正午的诗学, Ge Hongbing (2001b: 224) accused young writers of focusing too much on trivialities, the self, and individuality, stating that “fiction should not just provide a sum total of societal details, but a comprehensive understanding of its entirety.” Reading the passages and story line from *Sandbed* above, one can understand that many readers responded with shock and skepticism to Ge Hongbing’s own novel. For example, on an online literary forum at bbs.openedu.com.cn, Zhong Baoling 钟宝鸰 from Jiangxi University
posted the following comment on the discussion thread “The Stud Writer \[美男作家\] enters the stage”:\textsuperscript{92}

When I started reading \textit{Sandbed}, I was shaken, shocked! Disgusting! Ge Hongbing has turned into a Stud Writer! […] This is unbelievable, Ge Hongbing criticized the Beauty Writers \[美女作家\] and is even said to have coined and described the concept of Body Writing \[身体写作\]. But now he plays himself the role of a male Weihui. Professor Ge glowingly speaks of ‘lust,’ ‘body’ and ‘passion’ in \textit{Sandbed}. This is really what we can call ‘things have changed with the passage of time.’

(\url{http://bbs.openedu.com.cn/showtopic-188149.aspx})

One of the most outspoken criticisms came from the cultural critic Zhu Dake \textit{朱大可} (2003), who was the first to name Ge Hongbing a ‘male Weihui’ and stated that \textit{Sandbed} proved his prediction of “the death of literature”\textsuperscript{93} and that all that was left was a spectacle of “a fervent competition in taking off one’s pants” (热烈的脱裤子竞赛). The criticism of Zhu led to a public debate between Zhu and Ge, with scholars and public figures in support of either side.\textsuperscript{94} Predictably, no distinction seemed to be made between texts and authors in the arguments, whose contents ranged from style and themes, to morals and ethics, to the social duties of a scholar / author, and thus to personal details of the person under attack. Just like in the case of Weihui and \textit{Shanghai Babe}, a critique of the ‘immoral content’ of Ge Hongbing’s novel easily turned into the questioning of Ge’s personality or qualifications as a scholar. Take, for example, the following accusation by Zhu Dake (2003):

Ge is my friend, but I still feel very bad about him. He is a scholar who does not gain public attention because of his strength in ideas and literature, but for running mother naked through the streets while bashfully covering his ‘cheeks’ \[脸蛋\] (note: not covering his ‘private parts’ \[羞处\]). Although this type of show saves his own face, the Chinese literary world and academic world will inevitably lose face because of it.

Ge Hongbing responded to Zhu Dake in an interview with Zhu Hongjun \textit{朱红军} (2003), using the same personal arguments:

Zhu Dake used to be my friend, but now I feel he has broken our friendship. No one speaks such malicious words about his friend. He says he “watched a man taking off his pants,” sounding like a fishwife yelling in a marketplace, but most

\textsuperscript{92} The terms Beauty Writer and Stud Writer will be explained in the next paragraph.
\textsuperscript{93} Zhu Dake (1988) made this statement in his seminal article “Hollow Literature” \textit{空心的文学}.
\textsuperscript{94} Notably, at the end of the 1990s, a comparable debate arose in the poetry scene, referred to as the Popular-Intellectual Polemic. For an elaborate discussion of this polemic, see Van Crevel 2008 (particularly chapter 12).
SEDUCTION

importantly, his yelling is mixed up with vulgar “dialect” [...] and has already nothing left from the language of a scholar. To lose a friendship that was not based on shared ideals and beliefs from the outset, is not a high price to pay. It is only because he used to be my friend that I am willing to respond to his criticism. However, I am also aware of the generation gap between Zhu Dake and me; we can never come to an understanding. He is looking at today’s problems with a 1980s brain. He is a cultural chauvinist [文化本位主义者] using his 1980s standard of culture, morals and discourse in an attempt to defy an author of 2003.

Another critic of Sandbed was the author Hu Liuming 胡榴明. Hu (2003) claimed that the main reasons for the instant success of Sandbed were the theme of the “forbidden zone” of a love affair between a professor and student, and the fact that the publisher Changjiang Literature and Art Press was using its success of Crows 乌鸦 (2001) by Beauty Writer Jiu Dan 九丹 to promote Sandbed as the first novel by a Stud Writer. Furthermore, Hu Liuming believes that the suggestive title Sandbed (pinyin: sha-chuang), which many believe to be a homophonic pun for ‘go to bed’ (pinyin: shang-chuang), helped create the hype.

In an interview with Zhou Manzhen (2003), however, Ge Hongbing denies it was the publisher who invented the label of Stud Writer:

I can understand the importance of promotion, in order to sell his melons a farmer still has to call out for customers, right?! You can’t expect writers and publishers that bring out a book not to do some advertising, can you? However, I’m really sick of promotion, so before my novel was published I already told the publisher that I wasn’t going to take part in it. With regard to the issue of Stud Writer, at first I didn’t think it was such a big deal. A few years ago, it was journalists and people on the Internet that started to call me this; it wasn’t my publisher who coined the term. Although I don’t like it, journalists and editors jokingly called me a Stud Writer without any bad intention. However, from then on the media cleverly spread it around, saying things such as “Changjiang Literature and Art Press wants to create the first Stud Writer” and people began to use the label to judge - even viciously judge - my novel and myself. Then I thought it was a problem. [...] I’m not a Stud Writer and Sandbed is not an ‘erotic novel’ 情色小说 [...] That’s all based on misinterpretations […] it really frustrates me that Sandbed has been treated like this.

In addition, Ge explains that the title does not have any sexual connotation, but derives from the passage of Henry David Thoreau’s novel Walden quoted at the first page of Sandbed:
Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars.

Like Thoreau, Ge Hongbing considers himself a transcendentalist, believing in an ideal spiritual state that “transcends the empirical and physical, but which cannot be understood as a Christian God,” as he explains in the same interview:

When I say that the essence of Sandbed is transcendentalism, people respond asking “God is often mentioned in your novel, so you must have become a religious person?” What they actually do is to equate the ‘God’ Zhuge talks about with a religious God. In reality, my transcendental belief is not based on the Holy Trinity. The God I speak of is meant in the philosophical meaning as propagated by Kant and Heidegger, which has its origin in Ancient Greek philosophy and Hebrew tradition: the ultimate source of our existence […] What I continually ponder over is the problem of the injustice of being, and not the problem of God in itself. My belief is still within the framework of atheism.

However, since Christianity is still a sensitive topic in China, Sandbed’s overtly Christian protagonist and its many scriptural quotations are often regarded as one of the novel’s provocative features, in spite of the fact that Ge denounces most criticism as “misinterpretations.” So, when Xu Gehui 许戈辉 (2005) remarks in an interview with Ge Hongbing “it seems like you enjoy to constantly shock people or surprise them,” Ge answers “sometimes, but it is also the reason of my pain, because it is not understood.”

The Post-1960s and the Post-1970s: Me, Myself, and I

In the previous chapter, I discussed the polyvalence of the expression ‘Shanghai Writer,’ which primarily refers to the authors’ place of residence. An even more common practice is the labeling of writers (and movie directors, artists, etc) according to countless successive generations, since “each generation is born into a time in history and individual experiences take place in that historical context, so one’s personal experience can by no means be separated from history,” as Dai Jinhua 戴锦华 (1999: 77) explains it. In correspondence with China’s fast changes, each generational label refers to an increasingly shorter period of time, which makes them the more questionable: Weihui and Ge Hongbing, with only five years between them, are labeled as belonging to different generations.

Born in 1968, Ge Hongbing belongs to the Post-1960s [60后] (also New-Born Generation 新生代 for those born in the 1950s and 1960s), whereas Weihui, born in 1973, is considered a Post-1970 [70后] (also Late-Born Generation 晚生代, New
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New Human Beings 新新人类, or, in English, Generation X). If we set their novels against the background of the turbulent events during which Weihui and Ge grew up, however, there seems to be some justification for this division, especially as both writers have openly stated that their lives have informed their fiction directly. Or as Shao Yanjun 邵燕君 (2008: 13) puts it:

[Labeling by decade] also demonstrates that, in the last twenty to thirty years, accompanying the dramatic changes in China’s social, political, economic and cultural order, the groups in each decade differ from each other significantly in their attitudes towards life, in their thoughts and ideas, cultural resources and aesthetic tastes.

For example, in contrast to the Post-1970s, writers born in the 1960s often still have childhood memories of the Cultural Revolution. Furthermore, since most of the parents of the Post-1960s and Post-1970s came from the countryside or were sent there during the Cultural Revolution and moved (back) to urban areas in the 1970s, the Post-1960s mostly spent their childhood in the countryside, while many of the Post-1970s were either born in the city or moved there at a young age. This is also reflected in their works: most of the Post-1960s are still looking at the city more from an outsider’s perspective than the Post-1970s and tend to highlight negative aspects of urban life, like crime, prostitution, and loneliness, whereas the countryside of their youth is often nostalgically remembered as the city’s idyllic antithesis. Hence, Sandbed’s Zhuge laments:

I actually don’t like the role I have cast for myself to play, I even hate it, but I can’t extricate myself from it. I often tell myself that I should go back to my home village, I’m a country boy and I only feel secure in the countryside, it’s really true. […] Now that I think of it, only ‘the I’ of my childhood, ‘the I’ holding my grandfather’s hand as we walked on the ridges between the fields, only that I was not weak. The yellow wheat, the unfathomable cool wind, grandfather’s hand, these things could sustain me, but what else? (57)

… but Shanghai Babe’s CoCo says:

My friends and I, a tribe of the sons and daughters of the well-to-do, often used exaggerated and outré language to manufacture life-threatening pleasure. […] We were maggots feeding the city’s bones, but utterly sexy ones. The city’s bizarre romanticism and genuine sense of poetry were actually created by our tribe. (230)

In addition, most Post-1960s started writing urban fiction in the mid-1990s, after they had already published rural fiction, while the vast majority of the Post-1970s have only written urban fiction. In short, although the works of the Post-1960s also
express the new urban condition and consciousness, their approach differs from that of the Post-1970s. This is not to say that the works of the Post-1960s and the Post-1970s do not have a lot in common. The Post-1960s were among the first to distance themselves from a long-standing Chinese tradition in which literature, up until the Scar Literature and Root-Seeking literature of the late 1970s and the 1980s, was firmly embedded in a historical and cultural context. When in the 1990s, the Post-1960s shifted their focus from political and social ideals towards individuality, they paved the way for later generations that would be captured by notions like individualism, privacy, subjectivity, identity, personal experience, the self, and so forth. As Visser (2002: 194) notes:

In the dystopian 1990s, the urban space has become a topology for examining individual identity subsequent to the loss of collective, utopian, rural-based ideals.

Shao (2005: 5) also stresses these similarities between authors of different generations, and argues that the main difference was a shift from ‘individualized writing’ 个人化写作 by predominantly male Post-1960s towards ‘female privatized writing’ 女性私人化写作 by the Post-1970s, i.e., women writers who focus on private / personal 聊天室 issues. The works of both groups narrate subjective experiences, but, as Wang Jiren 王纪人 (2001: 2), who marks the same distinction, asserts, “individualized writing by male authors […] dissolves homogeneous mainstream discourse,” whereas “privatized writing by female authors” could be described as “self-closed writings in which there is nothing but private space.” In short, since the male Post-1960s are seen to use self-expression as a way of emancipation from social and political authority, their writing is often regarded as being against ideologically or politically informed literature. The works by the younger female authors, on the other hand, are considered utterly deprived of any ideological or political color, which explains their instant success, as Zhang Xiaohong (2003: 32) argues:

Literary convention, together with individualized readership, determines how and why certain texts are successful among a certain reading community. […] The success of female-authored Chinese texts must be measured against this background. Women authors’ portrayal of private experience caters to the common taste of a Chinese readership that is sick of revolutionary and historical allegories.

So, literary criticism now also included the authors’ gender in their discussions of 1990s fiction, often to the detriment of women authors. In 1994, for example, literary scholar Han Xiaohui 韩小蕙 coined the term Privacy Literature 隐私文学 (interchangeably used with Private Literature 私人文学) to refer to women writers
who focused on private lives and/or sexual experiences, whereas writings on private experiences by male writers were still considered Individual Literature 个人文学. In like manner, the idea that female authors are more inclined to set their stories in private spaces and accordingly narrate private – often equated to “trivial” – daily life issues, and that male authors prefer public settings, which is conventionally linked with the idea that they thus deal with social issues, is a recurrent observation that marginalizes female authors, even though “a woman and her life experiences are part of the social world, so narrating personal experiences is also a social representation and ‘voice’,” as Tie Ning 铁凝 (2000) rightly asserts (cited in Zhu [Aijun] 2007: 168). Nevertheless, Chinese “critics conveniently naturalize and neutralize male experience,” Zhu ([Aijun] 2007: 167), argues:

[male experience] is regarded as the human, the social and the national condition whereas women authors are almost always trapped with the notion of being personal and autobiographical. That is, the female characters in the works of female authors are often automatically equated with the authors themselves and their own personal experiences while the personal is automatically and absolutely separated from the social or public space. As a result, female authors are necessarily anti-social, narcissistic, narrow, incompetent and most of all, “unreal.”

I agree with Zhu Dake’s observation regarding the female Post-1970s. As for Privacy Writers from the New-Born Generation (of whom Lin Bai 林白 (b.1958), Chen Ran 陈染 (b.1962), Hong Ying 虹影 (b. 1962) and Hainan 海男 (b.1962) are the main representatives) domestic and foreign criticism is much more inclined to recognize that narrating a private life can also be a form of social critique. In his discussion of New-Born Privacy authors, Chen ([Xiaoming] 2002: 206), for example, argues that “the more they immerse themselves in their inner worlds, the more they deviate from the mainstream and rebel against the dominant ideology.”

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95 Unfortunately, I have not been able to find the original article “The Quiet Emergence of Women Privacy Literature” 女性隐私文学悄然涌动 by Han Xiaohui (1994) in Writer Magazine 作家报 to verify if this is indeed the first time the term ‘privacy literature’ is used. I base my statement on the many reliable sources that do refer to this article. See, for example, Wang [Lingzen] 2004: 176.
96 Tie Ning (b. 1957) started publishing her works after graduation from high school in 1975. In 1982, her short story “Ah, Xiangxue” 哦，香雪 won a national award for best story. In 1984, her story collections The Red Shirt Without Buttons 沒有纽扣的红棉袄 and June’s Big Topic 六月的话题 were awarded as well. Her first novel Rose Door 玫瑰门 portrays the sexual experiences of three generations of women under changing times. Tie Ning is the first woman to hold the position of chairperson of the Writers Association of China.
Writing the Body

My body fluids were becoming ink, oozing out of me into my pen, trickling into each word and phrase I wrote.

CoCo (108)

The body, up until now covered and suppressed by language, begins to speak. The thing is just this: we are unaware that the body is just the body itself. Now, the body’s speech allows it to manifest itself. It is no longer our tool, but has become our goal.

Zhuge (122)

The first instance of the term Post-1970 was in 1996, when the literary journal Fiction World 小说界, under the editorship of Wei Xinhong 魏心宏, used it as a title for a series of short stories written by writers born in the 1970s. Six out of seven authors (Weihui, Mian Mian, Mi Hong, Hu Fang 胡昉, Wei Wei 魏薇, Zhao Bo 赵波) in the series were women, and in 1998 the journal Writer 作家 published a similar series including only female Post-1970s (Weihui, Mian Mian, Wei Wei, Dai Lai 杜来, Jin Renshun 金仁顺, Zhou Jieru, Zhu Wenyi 朱文颖). In the preface of Writer, the editors write that what these writers have in common is that they are “modern, fashionable, beautiful,” but that their works are in fact “very diverse,” except for one thing: they are all “absolutely subjective and private.” This was the reason, according to Shao (2005: 10), that the label ‘Post-1970s’ was soon equated with the label ‘Beauty Writer’ 美女作家. The term Beauty Writer (also Babe Writer 宝贝作家, Fashionable Woman Writer 时尚女作家, and, in English, Glam-Lit) refers to urban female authors that supposedly use their looks toward increasing the sales of their work, and whose novels are predominantly characterized by an unprecedented celebration of female sexuality. In addition, the authors whose novels included taboo subjects such as drugs, depression, prostitution, homosexuality, and HIV were also called Alternative Writers 另类作家, as Zhang Xiaohong (2003: 32) puts it:

These labeled, or self-labeled, ‘beauty’ or ‘alternative’ writers strip off any delicate cover of privacy and expose private details to the public with little concern for major issues or the complication of mundane matters. An alternative lifestyle is highly celebrated: casual sex, drugs, homosexual practice, and violence.

Interestingly, the great majority of the Beauty Writers’ ‘founding mothers’ came from Shanghai and were soon referred to as ‘Shanghai girls’ 上海女孩, ‘Shanghai ladies’ 上海小姐, ‘Shanghai babes’ 上海宝贝 or ‘Shanghai roses’ 上海玫瑰, with Weihui and Mian Mian as main representatives. However, Beauty Writers from all over China followed suit. For example, in 2000, the journal Lotus 芙蓉 introduced three new Babe Writers from Beijing, “perhaps hoping to start a Beijing Babes trend
to complement the Shanghai Babes coterie,” as Kong (2005: 118) notes. Particularly Weihui’s *Shanghai Babe* triggered a wave of ‘babe-novels’ by young authors who sometimes even played with Weihui’s pen name: *Guangzhou Babe* 广州宝贝 by Weiyi 卫已, *My Babe* 我的宝贝 by Weimei 卫美, *Beijing Babe* 北京宝贝 by Liu Zongdai 刘宗岱, *Smalltown Babe* 小城宝贝 by Ba Yi 把裔, and so on.

In an interview with ‘hooligan writer’ Wang Shuo and ‘privacy writer’ Chen Ran in the *Beijing Daily* 北京日报 (24 May 2001), Wang teasingly remarks “Liu Zhenyun 刘震云 is rather good-looking, why does no one call him a Handsome Writer 俊男作家?” To which Chen rightly responds:

> It seems that society has this kind of tendency towards women. Why else are you often called ‘writer Wang Shuo’ and never ‘male writer Wang Shuo’? In certain cases, this might still be well intended. The problem is that publishers and the media are abusing this tendency and even encouraging it.

As mentioned before, *Sandbed’s* autobiographical content, and explicit sex scenes caused Ge Hongbing to be the first Stud Writer, followed by, again Shanghai-based, best-selling and good-looking Post-1980 (also Youth Writers 少年作家) Han Han 韩寒 (b. 1982) and Guo Jingming 郭敬明 (b. 1983).⁹⁷

The works of the Beauty Writers were soon labeled Body Writing, mostly written as 身体写作, but also 身体型写作 or 躯体写作, and sometimes interchangeably used with Lower Body Writing 下体写作, Pornographic Writing 色情写作, Organ Writing 器官写作, or Prostitute Writing 妓女写作.⁹⁸ Sources about Body Writing conflict in their explanations on the origin of the term, but a likely and often mentioned one is that it is borrowed from the essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975) by the French feminist Hélène Cixous (Cf. Dong [Zhengyu] 董正宇 2003: 79). Cixous regarded body writing as a political tool for women to speak out in their own voices and resist phallo-centric language. Women had the choice, as Cixous asserted (1976: 880), of being trapped in their own bodies by a language that does not allow them to express themselves, or they could use their body to write and create their own language:

> By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display – the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time.

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⁹⁷ For an interesting comparative analysis of the works of Guo Jingming and Beauty Writers, see Henningksen 2010: 66-74.

⁹⁸ For an excellent overview of domestic studies on Body Writing and the various uses of the term, see He [Ziwen] 何字温 2005.
Another recurrent explanation of the term *Body Writing*, however, is that Ge Hongbing coined the term in a personal letter to Mian Mian in the summer of 1995. Ge Hongbing (2003c) confirms this statement and claims that Mian Mian later commented in an interview:

Ge Hongbing is the first person who used the term ‘body writing.’ I agree with his original explanation of “the possibility to grasp rationality with sensual perception [用感性把握理性的可能].” So-called *Body Writing* is not at all some foolish impulse, but it is to use the body to grasp the universe. This is a pure process, transparent, and not everyone has this aptitude and ability.

In 2006, Ge Hongbing would publish his study *Body Politics* 身体政治 (with Song Geng 宋耕), in which he discusses the role of biopolitics in twentieth-century Chinese literature. In this book, Ge explains the phenomenon of Body Writing from the perspective of Michel Foucault’s ‘biopolitics,’ referring to *Shanghai Babe*, *Candy*, and his own *Sandbed*. Sheldon Lu (2008: 169) also uses the concept of biopolitics to characterize the writings of Body Writers:

Exposing the body, the body’s private parts, private sensations, and private thoughts constitutes the substance of such novels. […] On the one hand, this is the politics of liberation and excess in the Chinese experience of modernity, an existential condition that has rarely existed, especially for women and women writers. On the other, the phenomenon bespeaks the logic of cultural commercialization, namely, the self-packaging of the body for media effects. By posing to be sexual, young, beautiful, amoral, rebellious, and anti-intellectual, the female writer aspires to create a media reaction and become a celebrity.

Notably, using the body to commercial ends is one important factor that distinguishes the Body Writers from other authors who also write sexually provocative literature, such as the New-Born women Privacy Writers, but also the Lower Body 下半身 poets, of whom Yin Lichuan 尹丽川 (b. 1973) and Shen Haobo 沈浩波 (b. 1976) are considered the main representatives.99 Or as Kong (2005: 111) explains the difference:

The *Shanghai Babe* phenomenon thus reveals the ambiguous identity of women’s semiautobiographical novels – ‘privacy literature’ – in a marketplace where previously sincere body language has turned into sensationalistic posing.

And also Ge Hongbing makes, yet again, a clear distinction between the Post-1960s

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and Post-1970s in one of his studies. While quoting the sentence “all problems regarding the body are also problems regarding life” from Zhu Wen’s What is Garbage, What is Love 什么是垃圾，什么是爱, Ge (2006: 58-9) asserts that many Post-1960s use the body “as a means to revolt against ideology,” so for them “Body Writing is an answer to ideological writing”:

In this meaning of the term, Body Writing is above all discovering the body and returning to the body, to seek out the body in its existential-ontological meaning, in order for the body to eliminate the separation of itself and being. [The Post-1960s] believe that ‘the body’ contains all meaning and mystery of life and that all of the body’s speech - the senses’ speech, desire’s speech, etc - are rational. A true free, open society is in the first place a society in which the body is free, in which desire cannot be used as a means of oppression and freedom cannot take desire as a tool of resistance; people should have a relaxed approach towards desire and allow desire to use a bodily literary style to freely write itself. In works such as Han Dong’s Obstruction 阻碍, Zhu Wen’s I Love Dollars 我爱美元, Ge Hongbing’s Sandbed, and Lin Bai’s Body Fluid 汁液, the New-Born Generation authors, who appeared in the 1990s, face desire in an unconstrained way; they believe that individual desire is better than class hatred, that liberated sensory perception is better than suppressed rationality, and they even want to use the desirability of the body to combat the covering force of ideology. […] However, while the ‘Han Dongs’ 韩东们 [ = Post-1960s] thought of themselves that they were liberating the body, the Wei Wei’s 魏薇们 [ = Post-1970s] actually thought they were not going far enough. According to the Wei Wei’s the Han Dongs were still very tense about sex and desire, they had not at all dealt with sex and desire as sex and desire itself. Instead the Wei Wei’s attempted to approach sex and desire in a cool, indifferent way without any feelings of direction or principles […] no longer loaded with any spiritual dimension (resistance against ideology has also a spiritual dimension). […] The style of using ‘sex’ as a method to contest oppression and despair is different from the style of straightforward pleasure. For the former, pleasure has become a tool, while the latter believe that pleasure is the sole purpose of pleasure. […] From their perspective, the body can only be written through pleasure, and only when Body Writing leaves the traces of pleasure can it exist.

In other words, Ge Hongbing reads body writing by “the Weiwei’s” as a literary form of ‘pleasure for pleasure’s sake’. I agree, however, with the ‘Cixous-reading’ by feminist critics (e.g. Shi 2003, Zhong 2006) who regard women’s Body Writing

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100 Body Fluid is a novella which Lin Bai wrote shortly after she completed A War with Oneself. Although the story had no connection with A War with Oneself, Gansu People’s Publishing House insisted on combining the two stories into one novel under the title Body Fluid: a War with Oneself. According to Kong (2005: 107), “the publisher’s motive was to exploit the more suggestive title and explicit content of this novella to add to the sexual allure and commercial attraction of the original story.”
as a literary form in which the narration of the female body and her sensuous experiences are used to provide the female lyrical subject with her own voice. In short, I would argue that “the Weiwei’s” use body language as a means to disrupt the common male-dominated language in the same way as “the Han Dongs” use it as a means to disrupt politically ideologized language.

CHAPTER THREE

“A COMPLICATED LOVE AFFAIR: SHANGHAI AND THE FEMME FATALE

“Me no worry, me no care, me go marry millionaire, if he die, me no cry, me go marry other guy,” goes the rhyme “Miss Shanghai” which children liked to sing during the second half of the semicolonial period. This provocative verse in ‘Chinglish’ is representative of the popular imagination of the ‘modern girl’ who emerged around the world in the first half of the twentieth century. Just like her sisters in Tokyo, Berlin, New York, or Johannesburg, Miss Shanghai was an independent, westernized, sexually and socially liberated young woman, or as the editors of the study Modern Girls Around the World (2008: 1) put it:

Figure 3-2 Painting by
Friedrich Schiff (1908-1968)

What identified Modern Girls was their use of specific commodities and their explicit eroticism. [...] Adorned in provocative fashion, in pursuit of romantic love, Modern Girls appeared to disregard roles of dutiful daughter, wife, and mother.

Since Shanghai is “historically the most ‘foreign’ Chinese city” and “the quintessential symbol of modernity in China,” as Vivian Lee (2005: 133) argues, the Chinese version of the ‘modern girl’ 摩登小姐 or ‘new woman’ 新女性 was readily identified as a woman from Shanghai and even came to personify the city of Shanghai itself. Her fashionable clothes, open-mindedness, and wild lifestyle – all strongly influenced by foreign cultures – represented Shanghai’s cosmopolitan image, i.e. the idea that its culture is characterized by an openness to (if not a mixture of) other cultures, and which “has been invoked from time to time as the

101 Cf. Gimpel 2001: 9-10: “Shanghai was the epitome of all that was modern”, and Zhang [Xudong] 2000a: 349: “Shanghai, the epitome of Chinese urban modernity.”
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common ground between Shanghai’s past, present, and future” (Huang [Michelle] 2006: 476). However, as this openness was a side effect of colonial power, it simultaneously tainted the concept of the modern woman, giving it negative political connotations. In the words of Lee ([Vivian] 2005: 133):

In cinema, literature, and popular culture, images of women, especially those of liberated ‘modern girls,’ embody a modern sensibility informed by the complex, and sometimes contradictory, reactions of the Chinese toward foreign domination and the superiority of Western material culture in the colonial enclaves of China’s treaty ports.

According to Visser (2010a: 192-4), it is particularly the combination of Shanghai’s geographic location at the sea with the city’s colonial status that has reinforced Shanghai’s feminine image:

Shanghai is a city of flows. A former fishing village situated “on the sea,” as its name implies […] Shanghai’s fluidity metastasizes into her personification as a femme fatale, the enigmatic ‘Whore of Asia’ whose seductive yin ebb and flow. In the Chinese cultural imagination the south has long figured as ‘feminine’ in comparison to the ‘masculine’ north. […] Historically, then, southern Chinese aesthetics have been typified as exotic, fanciful, sentimental, and nostalgic, each quality attributed to languishing femininity. Modern Shanghai aesthetics become doubly feminized when depicted as vanquished by imperial conquerors. The characterization of the colonial ‘other’ as woman – personified in the seductive body of the Orient – doubly types the Chinese ‘modern girl’ as a femme fatale that both stimulates the male fantasy and challenges masculine authority.

The first Shanghai artist who fused the modern beauty and the modern city in his work was Wu Youru 吳友如 (1839-1897) (Yeh 2003: 420). In 1884, Wu was hired as chief artist for the Dianshizhai Pictorial 點石齋畫報, one of the first magazines that used the technique of lithography, which “helped […] to visualize, and in effect construct, Shanghai’s fin-de-siècle modernity,” in Dany Chan’s (2010b: 112) words. Wu became noted for his realistic illustrations of current affairs and modern life in Shanghai, of which his series One Hundred Shanghai Beauties 海上百艳图 (1893) is the most famous. In his depiction of Shanghai women it becomes clear that what makes these women ‘modern / urban / Shanghai’ is their adoption of a Western lifestyle, as Nancy Berliner (2010: 45) observes:

Despite some of these women’s nonchalance, a number of images do demand that the viewer focus on exotic imports. Several women play a game of billiards; two other daring dames don Victorian-style dresses for a garden outing under the caption “eye-catching clothes”; elsewhere, a group gathers around a
European oval dining table set with knives, forks, and spoons, a European-style fireplace — topped by a European-style clock — warming the happy bevy. Image after image in [One Hundred Shanghai Beauties] bespeaks the polycultural layering that is still Shanghai today, in its monumental as well as its intimate architecture.

The popularity of One Hundred Shanghai Beauties led to the launch of several fiction magazines depicting beautiful women on their covers - such as Unfettered Talk 自由谈 (1911), Saturday 礼拜六 (1914), and Young Companion 良友 (1926) -, and also gave the modern girl a prominent position in commercial art, of which the ‘calendar posters’ 月份牌 are probably the most famous. As Madeleine Dong (2008: 194-5) writes:

While the Modern Girl was represented in advertisements as a beguiling icon of the glamour of modern life and happiness ostensibly achievable through consumption of industrial commodities, she also often appeared as a mystery and was seen as a threatening figure [...] a woman as baffling as the modern city Shanghai itself.

Introduced from the West in the early twentieth century, calendar posters soon became the most important form of visual advertisement in China.103 However, the images of these sexy women promoting cigarettes, silk or whisky also came under attack from leftist intellectuals like Lu Xun, who asserted in a public lecture:

The women in calendar posters are sick. Not only are calendar painters unskilled but the subjects of their paintings are disgusting and depraved. (Cited in Laing 2004: 37)

Lu Xun and other New Culture era intellectuals strongly advocated the emancipation of women and conceived the politically aware, patriotic, independent, and educated new woman as the ideal which women’s modernity should aspire to (cf. Edwards 2000: 116). These advocates of female emancipation “urged women to ‘awaken’ to their social condition and liberate themselves from oppressive kinship ties,” as Megan Ferry (2005: 47) observes, and “once ‘awakened,’ reformers thought women would be productive to society.” So, when commerce turned the modern woman into a commodified object of the consumer’s gaze, these intellectuals fiercely condemned her ‘shallowness,’ an accusation that has continued to haunt commercially oriented women till the present day.

In short, the image of the modern girl was complex and contradictory: a symbol of colonial repression, a site of problematic modernity, or the mere embodiment of

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103 For an extensive study on advertisement art and the production and marketing of calendar posters in Shanghai, see Laing 2004.
“the promised pleasures of industrial society,” in Tani Barlow’s (2008: 288) words. However, in all these readings she evokes both fascination and anxiety in the spectator who is unable to ‘conquer’ her either literally or figuratively. It is precisely this disturbing power that puts her squarely in the tradition of the classic *femme fatale*, about whom Elisabeth Bronfen (2004: 114) writes:

The *femme fatale* has resiliently preserved her position within our image repertoire precisely because she forces the spectator to decide whether she acts as an empowered modern subject or is simply to be understood as the expression of an unconscious death drive, indeed, whether we are to conceive of her as an independent figure or merely as a figure of projection for masculine anxiety.

“Writing Shanghai women and writing Shanghai through women have a long tradition in modern Chinese fiction,” as Howard Choy (2008: 170) remarks. In Modernist Chinese fiction, particularly in the writings of the *New Perceptionists* who sought to inscribe “all metropolitan glamor, phantasmagoria, eroticism, decadence and complexity,” in the words of Zhang ([Yingjin] 1996: 306), the seductive *femme fatale* became a recurrent metaphor of urban modernity. Take for example the narrator in the story “Men Taken as Leisure Items” 被当作消遣品的男子 by Mu Shiyi ng, who remarks:

Rongzi, what a modern girl, thriving on stimulation and speed! You are a mixture of jazz, machinery, speed, urban culture, American flavor, modern beauty. 104 (Cited in Des Forges 2007: 148)

The plots of many of these *New Perceptionists*’ stories are remarkably similar: first the male protagonist falls for the exotic, modern woman, but then she deceives him or simply remains unattainable, arguably revealing the writers’ ambivalent attitude towards modernizing Shanghai; they are intrigued by the speed and spectacle of the alluring city and pursue a cosmopolitan lifestyle, but at the same time, they see the city as a source of moral decay where Western values threaten to erase traditional Chinese values (Scheen 2006b: 7). For example, this pattern also informs “Silver Statue,” also by Mu Shiyi ng, where a male doctor diagnoses a young beauty with “nymphomania, exhaustion, irregular menstruation… and tuberculosis.” While checking her naked body the doctor becomes sexually aroused, but back home he suddenly feels lonely, and “longs for a child, and a wife that sits next to him, knitting.” So, initially the young woman awakens his desires, which are then repressed by his fear of its inherent dangers and replaced by a longing for a

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104 The word ‘jazz’ was written in English in the original text. Contemporary authors seem to have adopted the common custom among the *New Perceptionists* to have many English words appear in their texts, giving the texts a more ‘exotic’ or foreign appearance.
traditional family in which his male dominance is secured.

Whereas Lee ([Leo] 1999: 198) traces the genealogy of the ‘modern girl’ in the literary imagination back to the popularity of the *modan gaaru* (Japanized English, abbreviated as *moga*) in 1920s Japan, Des Forges (2007: 149-50) notes that the beginnings of the concept can in fact be found in early Shanghai installment fiction:

The woman who invites pursuit but cannot be caught is a well-known modern trope; as such, we might expect her to differ strikingly from the women in turn-of-the-century Chinese fiction. But a close reading of turn-of-the-century Shanghai novels reveals that the elusive woman was there as well. […] Shanghai writers in the 1930s found it necessary to highlight the ‘foreignness’ and ‘modernity’ of their creations - referring to them repeatedly as ‘products of the modern age’ or ‘products of the metropolis,’ describing their physiques in terms perceived as ‘Western,’ giving them obtrusively ‘cosmopolitan’ tastes in literature and music - in order to differentiate them from the women in earlier texts that they in fact resemble in important ways.

When the cosmopolitan *femme fatale* - whose seductive power forms a constant threat toward men - made her comeback in 1990s Shanghai fiction, she was characterized by precisely these same features of foreignness and modernity, which is, interestingly, not only highlighted in her looks and tastes, but even in her comparisons to foreign mythological creatures, such as in Mark’s observation of CoCo:

> You’re a beautiful and seductive woman singing in the night. According to a German legend, a siren haunted the Rhine, she would sit on a great rock in the river, and use her song to lure sailors to their death there. (132)

… and in CoCo’s own words:

> I figured I’d already attracted the eyes of plenty men with my dancing -- like a princess in a Middle Eastern harem, and a bewitching Medusa, too. Men are often desperate to mate [with] a bewitching female who will eat them alive, like a black widow spider. (68-9)

What is more, regardless of women’ changed social status, these *femmes fatales* trigger responses that are intriguingly comparable to those sisters in colonial times received, ranging from critics praising them as avant-garde feminist characters to critics condemning them as empty-headed lust objects selling their bodies for fame. As Dai ([Jinhua] 2002: 132) argues:
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Facing rapid social changes during the transitional period and encountering the fetishism of money, desire, and survival and status anxieties, Chinese male writers and film-makers inadvertently adopted another strategy, once again transplanting their personal and social crisis and angst onto the female roles. The ‘new’ image of Women, which was once a sensation during the 1930s in Chinese urban literature, began to reappear in contemporary Chinese culture. (Translation by Jonathan Noble)

However, Dai does not mention that nowadays, as demonstrated, many female authors have themselves adopted the trope. Hence, the *femme fatale* is no longer exclusively a product of the male gaze, but often herself the one observing and speaking. Unsurprisingly, from now on not only these female characters, but also their narrators, i.e. women authors, came under attack.

WEIHUI: THE SCREAMING BODY OF A SHANGHAI BABE

![Shanghai Baby](image)

*Figure 3-3 (from left to right): The actress Bai Ling on the homepage of her blog, on the DVD cover of the movie Shanghai Baby and in front of a group of photographers in Cannes, for the promotion of Shanghai Baby.*

Yes it’s true this is what I do this is what I do the best to seduce you with the nakedness naked emotion naked heart naked mind and naked confession naked soul and naked compassion I seduce you with the pure naked me and my naked love I seduce you like a woman I seduce you like your best friend I seduce you like you I seduce you with the distance only on the other side of the computer....... Seduce with the nakedness with danger....... I am your mirror only reflects you....... [sic]

Tagline (see figure 3-3; far left) to the weblog of the actress Bai Ling 白灵 (b. 1966)

“We call her CoCo, as in the movie *Shanghai Baby*, because she was all herself in that movie.” Thus comments ‘Weallhope?’ on the weblog of the actress Bai Ling who
plays the role of CoCo in the movie adaptation of *Shanghai Babe*. Many approving comments of other fans follow, one of them quoting an “Italian university blog”:

It is clear that *Shanghai Baby* is primarily a film on Bai Ling, a restless actress of sensual charm who has also managed to win many Western viewers. [Bai Ling] appears in an indissoluble identify [sic] with the heroine of the novel and literally gives all of herself to the spectator. In fact, *Shanghai Baby* can also be seen as the story of a body (and its quest for independence), but in particular as a real celebration of the body of Bai Ling, to the point that every single shot is put at the service of the sensual sinuosity of this diva. (http://ling-bai.blogspot.com/2009/05/you-abstracted-me-yes.html)

In an incessant spiraling relation, Bai Ling is thus identified (and identifies herself) with the movie’s character CoCo, who is a representation of the novel’s character, who is in turn identified with the author Weihui, who in turn identifies herself with her own fictional characters. For example, even though Bai Ling is originally from Chengdu, she recurrently refers to herself as a ‘Shanghai babe’ on her weblog, just like the author Weihui does, on whom Rojas (2009b: 276) notes:

This process of recursive projection and identification is clearly evident, for instance, in the author’s personal webpage, which combines aphorisms from Wei Hui’s fictional works and pictures of the author herself in sexually provocative poses reminiscent of her own fictional protagonists.

Notably, the sexually charged, nude pictures and ‘live chat sessions’ on Bai Ling’s weblog portray an even more provocative and daring version of CoCo / Weihui. Likewise, at the movie promotion session in Cannes, Bai Ling created a remarkably similar scandal to Weihui’s in Chengdu, by wearing a dress which was even more revealing than Weihui’s. In other words, as Weihui “models herself on the larger-than-life fictional personas of her fictional protagonists,” to quote Rojas (2009b: 276) again, one could argue that Bai Ling models herself on larger-than-life mimetic personas of Weihui, accelerating “this sense of being trapped in a fun-house of mirrors” (275) to the extreme.

Surrounded by tens of male photographers (figure 3-3; far right), the sexy, half-naked Bai Ling – her sensual pose and smile reminding us of Miss Shanghai in the illustration of the old song (figure 3-2) – features as the quintessence of the seductive, modern woman turning herself into a spectacle for the male gaze. This is not to say, however, that she is no more than “an encoded figure who exists only as the phantasmic emanation of others,” as Bronfen (2004: 114) remarks in her discussion on the *femme fatale*, but “rather a separate subject who has agency and is responsible for her decisions.” The tagline of Bai Ling’s weblog, with the telling name Naked Seduction, informs us on Bai’s aspiration to “seduce with the nakedness with danger.” Moreover, by presenting herself as “your mirror,” Bai Ling
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attracts the eye of the spectator only to turn the objectifying gaze back to the spectator himself, who is now drawn into the “fun-house of mirrors” where depth and meaning have disappeared for what Jean Baudrillard (2001: 152) would call “the sacred horizon of appearances” and what he regards as the domain of seduction:

Is it seducing, or being seduced, that is seductive? Yet being seduced is still the best way of seducing. It is an endless strophe. There is no active or passive in seduction, no subject or object, or even interior or exterior: it plays on both sides of the border with no border separating the sides. (163)

Inside and outside the novel and the movie, the game of seduction is played out on many levels: between the protagonist and her fictional male admirers, between the author / actress and their audiences, but also between the fictional characters and the city of Shanghai. Take, for example, the DVD cover of the movie Shanghai Baby (figure 3-3; middle), which shows the mini-skirted Bai Ling paired with the flickering neon-lit Oriental Pearl TV Tower; like two seductive bodies – one phallic, one ostentatiously feminine – competing for attention. The cover immediately reminds one of the closing scene of Shanghai Babe’s second chapter, entitled “Modern Metropolis,” which shows so many references to the 1930s femme fatale that it deserves to be quoted in full:

As usual we strolled slowly over to the Bund. At night, it becomes a place of heavenly quiet. We went up the top floor of the Peace Hotel, where we’d discovered a secret passageway to the roof – through a narrow window in the women’s toilet and up the fire escape. We climbed up there often and were never caught.

Standing on the roof, we looked at the silhouettes of the buildings lit up by the streetlights on both sides of the Huangpu River, especially the Oriental Pearl TV Tower, Asia’s tallest. Its long, long steel column pierces the sky, proof of the city’s phallus worship. The ferries, the waves, the night-dark grass, the dazzling neon lights and incredible structures – all these signs of prosperity had nothing to do with us, the people who live among them. A car accident can kill us, but the city’s prosperous, invincible silhouette is like a planet, in perpetual motion, eternal.

When I thought about that, I felt insignificant as an ant on the ground. But the thought didn’t affect our mood as we stood on the top of that historic building. As the sound of the hotel’s septuagenarian jazz band came and went, we surveyed the city, yet distanced ourselves from it with love talk. I liked to undress right down to my bra and pants in the moist breeze from the Huangpu. Maybe I have a complex about underwear, or I’m a narcissist or an exhibitionist or something, but I hoped this would somehow stimulate Tiantian’s desire.

“Don’t do that,” said Tiantian painfully, turning his head away.
But I kept undressing, like a stripper. A tiny blue flower began to burn my skin, and that odd sensation made me blind to my beauty, my self, my identity. Everything I did was designed to create a strange new fairy tale, a fairy tale meant just for me and the boy I adored.

The boy sat entranced against the railing, sad but graceful, watching the girl dance in the moonlight. Her body was smooth as a swan’s, yet powerful as a leopard’s. Every feline crouch, leap and turn was elegant yet madly seductive.

“Please try. Come into my body like a real lover, my darling, try.”

“No, I can’t,” he said, curling himself into a ball.

“Well then, I’ll jump off the roof,” laughed the girl, grabbing the rail as if to climb over it. He caught her and kissed her. But broken desires couldn’t find a way. Love was a miracle the flesh couldn’t copy, and the ghosts defeated us… Dust covered us, closing my throat and my love’s.

Three A.M. Curled up on the big comfortable bed, I watched Tiantian. […] Lying beside my love, again and again I used my fingers to masturbate, making myself fly, fly into the mire of orgasm. And in my mind’s eye, I saw both crime and punishment. (13-15)

The scene, significantly, takes place on the rooftop of one of the symbols of cosmopolitan Shanghai, the Peace Hotel on the Bund, with the sound of the old jazz band playing in the background, and a beautiful view of the symbol of the new Shanghai: Pudong with the prominent Oriental Pearl TV Tower landmark. Although the feminine purple ‘pearls’ of the TV Tower have often been cited as an example of Shanghai’s feminine image, in CoCo’s eyes the tower symbolizes “the city’s phallus worship,” seemingly critiquing Shanghai’s patriarchal culture and — from the perspective of the *femme fatale* trope — revealing her own sexual desire: after reaching the rooftop through a women’ toilet, CoCo undresses herself for Tiantian and implores him to “come into my body.”

Michel de Certeau (1988: 92) has famously described the “vulgarurous pleasure” and “ecstasy” of viewing a cityscape from a high spot:

> It transforms the bewitching world by which one was ‘possessed’ into a text that lies before one’s eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god.

Looking out over the “rapturous sight” of the New Bund, “the only cityscape in China which really works,” as journalist Christopher Lockwood has described it (cited in Jansson and Lagerkvist 2009: 34), CoCo portrays herself as “madly seductive,” like the city itself, and even tries to compete with it by enticing Tiantian to turn his gaze from the skyline to her. In fact, on the first page of *Shanghai Babe*, CoCo already makes clear that this is her main goal in life:
Every morning when I open my eyes, I think of what kind of amazing thing I can do to attract the eye of people. I imagine myself one day in the future rising into the sky to burst upon the city like gorgeous fireworks. It has almost become my reason to live, the reason that makes it worth living on. (Weihi 1999: 1)

So, while the femme fatale CoCo represents the city itself, as the “Shanghai Babe” of the novel’s name, she tries to surpass its allure at the same time: “the neonlights were no more dazzling than I, the ATM’s no richer” (178).

Standing on the roof, however, CoCo is even more confronted with the absorbing power of the overwhelming and ever-changing city, making her feel “insignificant as an ant,” or as she would lament later:

Time’s high-speed train whistled and rumbled through modern tower blocks into the distance. My tears meant nothing. The joys and sorrows of any person meant nothing, because the train’s massive steel wheels never stop spinning for anyone. This is the secret that terrifies everyone in the cities in this fucking material age. (173)

CoCo tries to escape this feeling and to transcend the city by an exhibitionistic self-enactment. However, since CoCo’s seductive performance is a reproduction of the popular image of Shanghai, which is itself already a reproduction of an image, she arguably transforms herself into an empty simulacrum, in the Baudrillardian sense (2001: 173), “never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference.”

This is exactly how Shanghai artist Shi Yong 释勇 (b. 1963) represents contemporary Shanghai culture in his art project The New Image of Shanghai Today, as Visser (2010a: 188 and 189) notes:

The New Image of Shanghai Today, as Shi Yong cleverly reveals, is merely an endless unveiling of images whose only destination is more images. […] Simulated identities can only be sustained by the flip side of commodity culture, consumer desire.

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105 Interestingly, on her weblog, Bai Ling describes a similar experience when viewing the city from her hotel room: “I remember when I was shooting Shanghai Baby in Shanghai, I lived on the 38th floor in the hotel right above the Huangpu River, many times when my film took my time and reality away, I always stood there nose touched the big window and wondering: what if one evening or early morning I just jump through my 38th floor window to the traffic jammed busy river? Will it take me to where I supposed to go?” (http://ling-bai.blogspot.com/2008/03/830am.html).

106 Shi Yong has exhibited widely since the early 1990s. Recent shows include The Heaven, The World, ShanghART Gallery & H-Space (Shanghai, 2004), Follow Me!, the Mori Art Museum (Tokyo, 2005), Zooming into Focus, China National Art Museum (Beijing, 2005), and Felicidad Indecible, Tamayo Museum of Contemporary Art (Mexico, 2005). For an elaborate discussion of his work, see Visser 2010a (chapter 4).
For similar reasons, *Shanghai Babe* has recurrently served as a paradigm of the society of the spectacle, a society where “capital accumulated to the point that it becomes images,” in the words of Guy Debord (1994: 24). While Harry Kuoshu (2005: 97) argues that “*Shanghai Babe* is spectacle, showing the advance of the McWorld in China, and indicating how a market-transmitted lifestyle is mounting the center stage,” Visser (2010b: 6) goes even further, stating that the novel “perpetuates spectacle through seamless self-referentiality and insistent refusal to reflect the media consumer’s gaze.”

I agree with Kuoshu and Visser, for the reasons laid out above and since, in the roof scene, it also becomes clear that CoCo has become such an intrinsic part of the capital-driven society that even a private act such as tempting her boyfriend to make love to her is changed into an advertisement show in which she commodifies her own body by promoting it as a market product: “smooth as a swan’s, yet powerful as a leopard’s,” and later in the novel she tellingly says “I was like a credit card with a healthy line of credit which could be used now and paid for later” (178). Interestingly, CoCo’s depiction of her own body seems almost a reference to Mu Shiyng’s depiction of Rongzi’s body, in the earlier quoted story “Men Taken as Leisure Items”: “She has a snake’s body, a cat’s head, a mixture of softness and danger.”

So, on the one hand, the female perspective in *Shanghai Babe* converts the *femme fatale* from an object subjected to male desire and the male gaze to a desiring agent herself gazing at men, also reinforced by Tiantian’s ‘unmanly’ impotence. This is also what Lu ([Sheldon] 2008: 176-7) notes on the works of contemporary Shanghai writers:

> The body, sexuality, seductiveness, and manipulation are in part what endow the female characters with agency and power over the male. […] In their erotic longings, the city is eroticized, men are eroticized. […] She uses her wit, body, looks, and sexuality to seduce men, sleep with them, move into their apartments, live off their money, and control them. Men, Chinese or foreign, become their vehicles in the pursuit of capitalist consumption and entertainment.

On the other hand, I would argue, she is still represented as an object to the consumer’s gaze, albeit an ‘active’ object ‘selling itself.’ Besides, she is still not to be trusted; as Mu Shiyng’s “cat” Rongzi had “a lying mouth and a pair of cheating eyes,” “leopard” CoCo tells us:

> Women are born liars, especially when they traffic between men. The more complex the situation, the more resourceful they are. From the moment they can speak, they know how to lie. Once, when I was very young, I broke a priceless antique vase and said the family cat had done it. (64)
In short, instead of revealing her inner life or a vulnerable side of herself to Tiantian, CoCo turns herself into a spectacle, reproducing a clichéd image of female sexuality to such an extent that it becomes simulation, or, in the words of Baudrillard (2001: 190), “the ecstasy of the real”:

Ecstasy is that quality specific to each body that spirals in on itself until it has lost all meaning, and thus radiates as pure and empty form.

Likewise, by writing her novel on Shanghai, CoCo gains a form of control over the city and wants “to create a separate reality, more real than the one we live in” (24; italics added). Yet again, her “passion of intensification, of escalation, of mounting power, of ecstasy, of whatever quality so long as […] it becomes superlative,” in Baudrillard’s (2001: 190) words, is expressed in her wish for her novel to “explode like fireworks and give meaning to our existence” (64):

There should be a road show with parties throughout China to promote the book. I’d wear a backless black dress and a grotesque mask. The floor would be littered with confetti made from my book, and everyone would be dancing madly on it. (66)

In the roof scene, we also see the spectacle embodied in CoCo when the narrator tells us that all she does is “designed to create a strange new fairy tale,” immediately switching to a fairy tale style by changing from the first person to the third person, i.e. “the boy” and “the girl.” One could argue, conclusively, that while CoCo laments that the city’s “signs of prosperity had nothing to do with us,” in fact, she represents herself as one of these very signs.

Interestingly, the passage ends with CoCo’s guilt about masturbating after her fruitless attempts to seduce Tiantian. The new female voice that has been given to the femme fatale has apparently not been able to free herself from the moral judgments once voiced by her male narrators and/or spectators. To make things worse, she even fails to sexually conquer her admirer, and has to settle for self-stimulation, which mirrors her previous performance. However, Tiantian is still ‘fatally attracted’ to CoCo, which is attested by his deadly overdose, or, in the narrator’s own words:

[CoCo’s] life would always be a revolver of desire, capable of going off and killing at any moment. (248)
The following passage in *Sandbed* is remarkably similar to the roof scene in *Shanghai Babe*:

That evening Zhang Xiaomin came over, bringing some bread and fresh vegetables, and a six-pack of beer. After dinner we climbed up on the roof to drink our beer and chat.

Thanks to Shanghai’s ‘from flat to pitched’ roof-renovation project, my building’s rooftop now had red colored tiles and they had even installed neon lighting. Sitting on the sloping roof, we viewed the pineapple-shaped dome of Shanghai Circus World’s glowing orange in the distance. Nearby the elevated highway of Gonghe Road meandered like a luminous ribbon past our feet.

There were no stars, but a pleasant wind was blowing. Watching the autumn wind wash over Zhang Xiaomin’s body, now swirling her hair, now lifting her skirt, it might have been the beer talking, but I couldn’t help laughing out loud: “The wind is doing what I dare not!” Zhang Xiaomin absentmindedly smoothed down the hem of her skirt: “You’re not as sweet as the wind, I’ll let the wind do things you can’t.” (66)

Again, a woman’s seductive body is placed against the backdrop of alluring Shanghai, the main difference being that this time the male character is rejected by his seductress, albeit in a playful way. The young student Zhang Xiaomin is in fact in love with her professor Zhuge and tries to win his interest by lying that she has a boyfriend. Although Zhuge is just thirty years old, he repeatedly emphasizes their age difference and speaks of “people of your generation.” In this way, Xiaomin is represented as the young modern girl whose tempting flirtations retain innocent, although never completely free from potential threat. “She was shy and reserved, but mischievous and cunning at the same time” (5), in the words of Zhuge:

“Out of breath, are we? Are you so excited to see me?” I pulled out a chair to let her sit down.

Annoyed she said: “Panting over you? Aren’t you the one panting now?” She hung her coat over the back of the chair and asked the waiter for a ginger ale. Zhang Xiaomin wore her flaming red hair in wild disorder. Her emerald green top made such a jarring contrast with her hair that it was a pain to the eyes. Revealing her skin, her low-rise jeans were of the instant worn-out kind with a big rip at the knee patch. When she crossed her legs, her kneecap peaked out at you. I noticed that many people in the bar were looking at her, but Zhang

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107 Between 1995 and 2005, the roofs of old apartments in forty residential quarters were renovated from flat roofs into pitched roofs as part of the urban renewal project of Shanghai’s 9th and 10th five-year plans. See: Shanghai.gov.cn → 城市建设.
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Xiaomin didn’t care. “So you’re excited, why don’t you just admit it?” I said, lowering my voice and passing her the books. “Okay, you’re right! You really turn me on. Better now?” Zhang Xiaomin accepted the books and noisily took a great gulp of ginger ale. The sound of her drinking was extraordinarily loud. (2-3)

In the scenes on the roof and in the bar, it becomes clear that even though Xiaomin’s position is subordinate to Zhuge’s, she is still the one who takes the initiative and sets the limits. Remarkably, Zhuge does not seem to have any influence on the course of his relationship with Xiaomin, who regularly comes to his home uninvited (climbing through his window when he is not at home), sleeping in his bed when she feels like it (“She insisted on using the crook of my arm as a pillow, but she didn’t have any experience and didn’t even know how to attract a man’s attention” (5)), and eventually staying for a long time until she decides for herself it is time to move in with her new boyfriend.

Before Xiaomin leaves, however, she begs Zhuge to make love to her, because she wants “to offer her virginity to the man she loves.” Zhuge refuses her wish, which is the only time throughout the novel he seems to make a decisive choice in their relationship. This is a recurrent feature of Sandbed: the male-narcissistic Zhuge plays a rather passive role and all women – as true femmes fatales – seduce him. Eventually, however, the women turn into self-sacrificing admirers of Zhuge, which ostensibly casts him into the role of an homme fatale, albeit a passive one, whose fatal attractiveness is only enhanced by his passivity, or more precisely his implicit, morally motivated hesitation about accepting the offer they make of their bodies: presumably, this is meant to portray him as protecting them against himself.

Take for example the American blonde, blue-eyed Anna, who used to be Zhuge’s girlfriend when he was studying in Nanjing. One day Zhuge receives a package with letters and a diary from her. It turns out that Anna has committed suicide and her boyfriend decided to send all reminders of Anna and Zhuge’s love affair to Zhuge. The content of the letters and diary reveal Anna’s grief and despair after Zhuge broke up with her, almost suggesting that this is what eventually led to her death. Opening her diary at random, he reads:

I will never be able to love anyone else. My soul is tied to yours forever. […] I can only hope over time to cure myself of you. Perhaps if I started something new it would help me get over this. But in truth, deep down I don’t think I can ever be cured. (81)

This male-chauvinist view of sexual and love relationships in Sandbed is disturbingly common in contemporary Chinese fiction and cinema, and reflects “the post-revolution and pro-market nature of China’s gender politics,” in the words of Zhong Xueping (2007: 303):
Increasingly, women are shown as emotional beings whose reason for existence depends on whether or not men love them.

Indeed, the women in Zhuge’s life are only portrayed from the perspective of their love and/or admiration for Zhuge. In their role as Other they do not function as equal, independent subjects, but merely as alter egos (each woman representing another side of Zhuge) who either complement or reaffirm Zhuge’s self-image.

Whereas works by female writers in general, and Shanghai Babe in particular, have repeatedly been criticized for their narcissist tendency, the male narcissism of Zhuge that permeates Ge’s entire novel is rarely mentioned. While I would argue that CoCo’s own declarations “Narcissism is probably my dominant vice” (145) and “I am falling in love with the ‘I’ in my novel” (cited in Rojas 2009b: 275) have a humorous, self-ironizing side to them, Zhuge’s self-love is matched only by his ostentatious self-hatred:

A nothingness [like me] can never love another person; a nothingness that regrets everything and doesn’t believe in anything. He also doesn’t deserve to get anything, of course. The only thing he will get in the end is nothingness as well. (84)

In the course of the novel, it becomes clear that Ge’s self-contempt stems from the same origin as his self-love, as they are both manifestations of his self-obsession, a seemingly paradoxical characteristic which Zhong ([Xueping] 2000: 139) also recognizes in the male protagonists of works by other Chinese male authors, such as Mo Yan’s Red Sorghum 红高粱家族:

[…] both the loathing of the self and the desire for a better one hinge on a recognition of the author / narrator’s own ugliness. With the recognition comes a desire to identify with a more desirable object (so as to preserve the self). In the novel, the more desirable object is a strong and masculine figure, someone – according to two of the four narcissistic object-choices defined by Freud – the subject himself ‘would like to be’ and someone ‘who was (or was believed to be) once part of himself.’

At the same time, however, I am aware of McDougall’s (2003:11) warning that “self-projection in fiction by Chinese writers and their audience’s tolerance for authorial narcissism” is a persistent feature in Chinese fiction, and that non-native readers therefore should be cautious in their understanding of sentiments such as “self-justification, self-deception, self-pity, self-aggrandizement, self-importance, self-praise, self-satisfaction, self-deception, self-indulgence and self-glorification” (46).

If we read the self in Sandbed “not necessarily [as] the ‘self’ of the individual
but the ‘self’ as a member of the particular social group to which they belong,”108 to continue with McDougall’s (2003: 95) argument, the fatally ill character Zhuge arguably serves as an allegory for the struggle of Chinese intellectuals with contemporary society. This reading could also explain Ge’s choice for the uncommon two-character last name Zhuge (of which the second character ge 葛 is the same as Ge Hongbing’s family name), which will remind any Chinese reader of the famous chancellor during the Three Kingdoms, Zhuge Liang 诸葛亮 (181–234). Not only is he regarded as one of the most accomplished military strategists and statesmen, but, more importantly, he is specifically well known for his reputation as an intelligent and learned scholar. The protagonist’s name can thus be read as an indication of both Ge Hongbing’s identification with the historical figure and the protagonist’s function as a representation of Chinese male intellectuals.

In this sense, I would argue that Sandbed should be placed in the domestic “widespread and powerful” tradition of self-loathing in modern Chinese literature that “satisfies a need to explain China’s woeful modern history, while at the same time reaffirming a prevalent sense of national uniqueness,” as Geremie Barmé (1995: 222 and 227) observes, and:

> From the early 1990s onward, following the nation’s increased economic growth, there has been a new twist in this tradition of self-loathing. […] Consumerism as the ultimate revolutionary action is seen by many as playing a redemptive role in national life, for it enables people to remake themselves not through some abstract national project but through the self-centered power of possession.

In Sandbed, Zhuge initially seems to adapt to China’s contemporary society of transnational consumer capitalism, but his worsening illness is almost immediately accompanied by a growing disillusionment.

At first, Zhuge retreats from the outside world by creating a little male utopia at home where he peacefully lives together with Xiaomin and Pei Zi: “The Shanghai of February was cold, but our mood was only getting better; while Zhang Xiaomin did the shopping, washing and cleaning, Pei Zi did the cooking and the dishes” (189-90). As one can understand, Zhuge no longer feels any urge to leave the house and also, for example, quits going to the gym. Furthermore, he repeatedly reveals his increasing aversion towards China’s consumer society, such as in the following witty depiction of their weekends:

> Let me also tell you about our weekend activities. These were generally decided by a democratic vote of the entire electorate of the three of us, but usually

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108 Cf. Chen [Xiaoming] 2002: 204: “Writers typically start from personal experience but aspire to expand this sphere to the experience of human beings in general. This is especially the case in Chinese culture, where individuals, society and history are so closely related that personal stories are subsumed in grand narratives of the nation-state.”
resulted in a two-to-one majority in favor of shopping expeditions, and since participation in the electoral process implies acceptance of the will of the majority, I was always obliged to go along. I always ended up strolling the streets until twelve at night, dead tired, but if you still hadn’t actually bought anything, then it was crucial to conceal any hint of discontent, since after the slightest sign of frustration you would find yourself on the spot, and the shopping expedition, which was just about to end, would immediately change into a fanatic, marathon shopping spree that went on till dawn, with the cost of the exercise reverting to the dissatisfied party […] (190)

In the original, the sentence from “I always ended up…” goes on for thirteen lines (see the passage starting with “whenever we passed Häagen-Dazs…” at the very beginning of this chapter), summing up all kinds of products they would end up buying. The lengthy summation of foreign-brand consumption products evokes in the reader the same sense of tiredness Zhuge is feeling and reveals the absurdity of contemporary consumption society.

Notably, Zhuge does not aspire to a return to traditional Chinese culture. For example, although he calls himself a “country boy” and nostalgically brings back memories of his hometown Nantong, “where he belongs,” when Zhuge actually visits his family in Nantong he feels estranged from the place and its people. The same is true for when Zhuge visits Nanjing, the city where he once studied. The narrator sentimentally depicts the “old” city with the “Sun Yatsen Memorial Hall and the Purple Mountain bathed in the evening’s golden afterglow,” and where “nothing had changed at all, as if nothing here ever could change, except for me.” But he then realizes that “apart from some memories, I had basically become a stranger in this town.” In short, while Zhuge feels lost in this world and yearns for the past, he recognizes that there is no way back, painfully reminding him of the transience of life. Or as Zhuge ponders when looking at the city wall of Nanjing:

Looking down over the wind-blown Ming wall standing gloomy in the late fall of this 1999-autumn, I was nevertheless stirred by a warm inner feeling: people sometimes yearn for the past, trying to revisit their previous state, hoping to open a dialog with the former self that time has altered from within. But externally, time can seem to intentionally halt its pace. When I lived in Nanjing all those years ago, the city wall was just like it is today. Therein lies the dichotomy: the world goes on eternally, it is everlasting. But what about us?

Throughout the novel, the nostalgically depicted “old” and “never changing” Nanjing is contrasted to the “restless environment” of “ever-changing” Shanghai. It is thus no coincidence that it is in the old Nanjing that Zhuge meets the widow Pei Zi: whereas all women surrounding Zhuge share many characteristics with the modern *femme fatale*, the only woman he truly falls in love with is the most traditional one.
Pei Zi: A Widow Who Can Truly Love

When Pei Zi lives in Nanjing they meet on an Internet forum of the King Net Film and keep writing to one another. One day Pei Zi wants to meet Zhuge in a hotel room. Entering the room he notices:

Pei Zi appeared a bit older than I had imagined, perhaps in her early thirties. Her hair was done up high in a bun; her dress was cut low in an off the shoulder décolleté, revealing an exquisite neck and collarbones. Nestled in her cleavage, a single pendant pearl on a finely wrought chain drew the eye like a magnet. Her skin was snow-white and smooth as marble, yet soft, with a hint of moisture that inspired the urge to touch, to fondle. Yet her face held a languorous pallor. I call it languorous rather than weary. […]

“My choosing this place to meet you won’t make you think I’m a loose woman?” Pei Zi asked.

“Not at all, truth told, you are really beautiful. If you wanted to act like a loose woman, you wouldn’t need to go to all this trouble,” I replied honestly.

“Beautiful? I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“I don’t. And anyway, your shoulders are truly beautiful. I really like them.”

With a little “Ah!” she instinctively brought her hands up to cover her shoulders. It seemed she was actually rather shy, perhaps a bit prudish and oversensitive, but her manner really touched me. Of course, she was obviously dressed to kill and, despite some earlier reservations, I was finding myself an ever more willing victim. But beyond that, something in her reticence and natural reserve seemed to reach to the very depths of my heart. (22-23)

Pei Zi and Zhuge make love in the hotel room, but the next day Zhuge secretly runs off, only leaving a brief note behind. Nevertheless, ever since this first meeting, Pei Zi is deeply in love with Zhuge and soon shows the same devotion as Anna and Xiaomin:

I swore that if you came to me, I would devote my life to loving you. If I have made such a pledge, I must abide by it. But I must love you from a distance, from far beyond your perception. I can’t force you to love me, nor allow myself to disturb you with my love. (118)

Only when Zhuge insists on paying for a present Pei Zi bought for his father is the traditionally dutiful Pei Zi so deeply insulted that she leaves Zhuge. After her departure, Zhuge realizes how deep his feelings for Pei Zi have become, although he also ponders: “perhaps my attachment to our relationship was not so much an expression of my love for Pei Zi, but merely a reflection of my own narcissism,” implying that the traditional Chinese Pei Zi represents to Zhuge something of himself: yet again a female character’s subjectivity is reduced to an alter ego of the male protagonist.
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When Pei Zi hears from Xiaomin, with whom she secretly stays in touch, that Zhuge has fallen ill, she devotedly moves back into their home. Even though Zhuge has now declared his love for Pei Zi, she initially tries to convince him to choose the young Xiaomin instead, reminding one of the traditional Chinese ideal of first wives who devotedly search for suitable concubines for their husbands, or the didactic treatise For Women 给女人们 that Ma Guoliang 马国良 (1908- ) wrote around 1930, in which the chapter “Love” 恋爱 describes what a woman should be like to succeed in love. As Wendy Larson (1998: 105-6) writes:

Ma argued that winning a man’s love was not difficult, but gaining his respect was, and for this a woman did not need profound learning or great wealth, but a lofty integrity [高贵的品质] and a distinguished character / personality [伟大的人格].

[…] Abstractly, however, love required the willingness to sacrifice everything: “Love bravely, when you love. Women who truly can love must set their minds to sacrifice everything for love!”

Indeed, after Zhuge proposes to Pei Zi, she surrenders, and, at the end of the novel, she even literally gives her life to Zhuge when she commits suicide so they can die together.

Luo Xiao: The Fountainhead of Sex Appeal

The one female character that does not follow the pattern of transforming from a seductress into a self-sacrificing admirer of Zhuge, but fully matches the classic femme fatale, as a metaphor for the city of Shanghai, is Luo Xiao 罗筱, Zhuge’s fitness instructor, whom the narrator introduces as follows:

She had once been a runner-up in a beauty contest. […] In real life she looked even better than her picture: her long slim body in close fitting tights exuded an almost palpable vitality. Just looking at her made me realize that this kind of physical condition is the most charming of all beauties, the very fountainhead of sex appeal. (152)

After their first gym lesson, Luo Xiao flirtatiously asks Zhuge out for dinner and changes into the clothes of a sexy Shanghai business women: “She was wearing a high-collared tight-fitting sweater, a very smart, business-like skirt and red high-heeled shoes.” In the restaurant, Luo Xiao also shows her independence when she orders the dishes, instead of having them conventionally ordered by the man. Her choice reveals her sophisticated taste: “king scallops, Australian lobster, a plate of grouper, taro roots, and a bottle of white wine to wash it down.” During their conversation, Luo Xiao and Zhuge discover they share an interest in classical music and philosophy, and Luo Xiao has even read some of Zhuge’s academic books. Luo
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Xiao’s cosmopolitan outlook also comes to the fore in the way she invites Zhuge to her home:

“If you could go with me on a trip, where would you take me: Hawaii, Mount Fuji, New York, or London? You pick the place,” Luo Xiao said.

I thought for a moment and then said: “Mount Fuji.”

Luo Xiao responded: “It would seem that you are quite the gentleman. If you had chosen Hawaii it would mean you think of me as a lover; New York, as a business partner; London, as just a friend; but choosing Mount Fuji means that you respect me. Apparently you really do accept me as your teacher. That’s very good. You passed the test!”

“What test?” I asked.

“The test that determines if I will invite you back to my place. If you want to listen to music, we’ll be much more comfortable there than in some bar!”

(158)

Yet again, Zhuge submissively follows his seductress. Luo Xiao passes the keys of her Buick car and orders Zhuge to drive: “I like watching men drive” (159). After they arrive at Luo Xiao’s home, they soon end up having sex, with Luo Xiao still being the one who seduces and controls:

Luo Xiao had taken a condom, sheathed me with it, and was already straddling me. She had somehow changed the music to Rachmaninov’s Paganini Variations, and after a moment of calm as the opening theme was presented simply, for the second time that day, she put me through my paces, this time with a short version of the Kama Sutra — not surprisingly, mostly the female-dominant positions.

I heard a long, drawn-out sentimental sigh circling between our bodies. I heard the distant emptiness of time braying beside us. I saw the magma beneath the earth burst forth to mingle with the heavens.

But in my heart?

My heart was in a black wilderness, without a single guiding light to show the way. (161)

The independent, sexy and cosmopolitan Luo Xiao awakens Zhuge’s desires; enthralled he follows her home and indulges in the joys of music, alcohol and sexual pleasure. But straight after they have sex, a post-coital tristesse overwhelms him. Zhuge’s feeling of loss and emptiness after having ‘conquered’ his seductress strikingly reminds one of the disenchantment the protagonists in the works of the New Percepcionists experienced: initially intrigued and mesmerized by the alluring modern city of Shanghai, embodied in the femme fatale, the male characters eventually fear her potential danger and either leave her or meet with an unfortunate end.

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In the case of Luo Xiao and Zhuge, Zhuge becomes increasingly reluctant towards sex in general and sex without love in particular, so when Luo Xiao tries to seduce him again, she fails:

Once, Luo Xiao came over and things got hot between the two of us, though we didn’t make love. Kneading my unresponsive lower parts with her hand, Luo Xiao jokingly asked me, “Is it because you’ve been overworked these days? Having two beautiful girls constantly at hand must be very tiring!”

“I really don’t know myself,” I replied, “but we don’t make love, actually. Somehow, I just don’t even think about it.”

“You don’t feel any desire?”

“It’s not even that,” I hesitated, not knowing how to answer, “It’s more like what I really need is human warmth. It seems more important to me to have a warm relationship than to make love. Sometimes making love actually destroys the warmth of feeling. When I think of things on that level, I don’t feel like making love.” (192)

In this way, Zhuge’s disgust with consumerist urban life seems to be mirrored in his sex life with the woman who represents this life the most.

Interestingly, both erotic episodes of Zhuge and Luo Xiao are followed by scenes in which the cat Dan features. After the first time Zhuge has sex with Luo Xiao and arrives home disheartened, he hears its meowing sound. While feeding the cat, Zhuge notices Dan’s frightened eyes and for fifteen minutes they stare into each other’s eyes, after which Zhuge asks himself:

Why was Dan so wary of me? Why did he feel so insecure? Do all animals in this world mutually harm each other? Is there no life that can feel sure of itself? (163)

The second scene goes as follows:

Luo Xiao jumped in shock, as she had taken Dan for a decorative stuffed animal. As we were leaving, she leaned close to my ear, as though she feared Dan might overhear her, and whispered “You shouldn’t keep that cat!” But how could I abandon Dan again? Where would I put him? (193)

Dan is the big, black cat of Catherine, a little blonde girl who is deaf and mute. From the day Catherine rings at Zhuge’s door holding a little note “my cat Dan is missing, anyone that finds him, please help me to get him back,” Catherine and Dan are forever intruding in Zhuge’s life, unexpectedly appearing and disappearing. Every time Catherine sits on Zhuge’s doorstep he searches for the cat, and when he sees the cat he searches for Catherine, but he is never able to bring them together.

Dan seems to be a reference to the novels of the Japanese author Haruki
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Murakami that are immensely popular in China and in which cats in general, and missing cats in particular, are a recurrent feature. Murakami is also literally mentioned by Luo Xiao, when she tells Zhuge that all music she plays are “mentioned in Murakami’s novel Dance, Dance, Dance.” Moreover, the name of Zhuge’s favorite bar in Nanjing, “Black Cat” might not only be a reference to the cat Dan in Sandbed, but also to the bar “Peter Cat” in Murakami’s The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle, named after a real cat in Murakami’s life, who was sent to the countryside to recover from the stress of big city life (Rubin 2003: 27). Whether the cats in Sandbed should be defined as intertextuality or as something more akin to plagiarism is open to debate. However, since the complicated problem of plagiarism in China exceeds the scope of this study, I will not engage in this discussion.\footref{sr}

One day when Dan is in Zhuge’s home again, Zhuge decides to look for Catherine without giving up. A full chapter follows in which his search for Catherine turns into a surreal story that strikingly resembles the writing style and stories of Murakami. Thereafter Catherine is never found, but the cat keeps coming back to Zhuge, even after he has brought him to a suburb far out of town, raising many questions in Zhuge about why the cat has come into his life, but also about himself. The cat thus appears to symbolize “the link to the inner self, to the authentic, instinctive essence deep within the artist’s soul,” just like Dalia Marcowitz and Kzia Alon (2008) explain the role of the cat in the novels of Murakami. This might also explain why the seductress Luo Xiao never returns in the story after she has whispered in Zhuge’s ear that he shouldn’t keep Dan. The loss of self looms larger than the loss of desire, and the femme fatale loses out.

So, whereas CoCo’s life “would always be a revolver of desire,” Zhuge’s loss of desire is followed by “an empty ringing of his inner self” (163). It is precisely this difference in CoCo’s and Zhuge’s mental attitude that makes them respond in remarkably different ways to transforming Shanghai.

AN IMAGINED LOVE AFFAIR: COCO AND ZHUGE

Although we are taught not to judge a book by its cover, the covers of Shanghai Babe and Sandbed might move one to agree with Zhu Dake’s qualification of Ge Hongbing as a male Weihui. The first thing that catches the eye is the women with their similarly shaped eyes, mouth, and slim faces, and half-naked bodies. Besides, both covers seduce the reader with catchy sentences on love, sex and the city, such as “A mournful love experience; a sorrowful life story […] Shanghai: my party of life and death, my secret grand banquet” (Sandbed) and “A physical and spiritual

\footref{sr} Notably, the implicit criticism on Japan’s official remembrance of its actions in China during the World War II in The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle is also very similar to Ge Hongbing’s renowned criticism on China’s official remembrance.

\footref{sr} For an extensive study on plagiarism in Chinese fiction, see Henningsen 2010. On intertextuality in Chinese poetry, see Zhang [Jeanne Hong] 2004 (particularly chapter 2).
experience from a woman to other women [...] an alternative love story set in the secret garden of Shanghai” (*Shanghai Babe*).

CoCo and Zhuge indeed share many similarities. They move around in the same intellectual circles (Zhuge works at the university where CoCo graduated and where her father works as a history professor), they ‘consume’ foreign lovers, alcohol, designer goods, religion, philosophy, literature, music, and movies, and they desperately yearn for recognition and love, and fear death and loneliness, while celebrating the freedom of choice in the search for their selves. Finally, both characters eventually come to the conclusion that the intoxications of music, alcohol, and sex provide no more than a brief respite from inner feelings of emptiness. Does all this mean that, pursuing Zhu Dake’s line of thought, Zhuge is in fact a ‘male CoCo’? I would say no. Before I enter into my argument, however, I prefer to let the characters speak for themselves.

Imagine CoCo and Zhuge inhabiting the same novel and falling in love. One day they go out for a drink, and sitting in a quiet little corner of a pub in one of Shanghai’s many bustling streets, they have an intimate chat. What would they talk about? If we merge lines spoken by CoCo in a dialogue with Tiantian, with (parts of) a letter from Zhuge to Pei Zi – both in their original order – an imaginary conversation might look like this:

**CoCo:**

I will h-a-t-e you.

**Zhuge:**

I know you hate me, but the one who hates me most in this world is not you but I myself. [...] Now you hate me, but your hate can’t last forever. When you find a new life, you won’t hate me anymore. To be honest, I’m just an insignificant, passing visitor in your life. I’m the only one who can persist in my self-loathing; I’ll have to live with that the rest of my life. Actually, all I’m doing at this moment, I don’t like. The only reason I have the energy to do it is because I want to get rid of it. It seems like I do a lot of things, and do them quickly, but in reality?! I do them out of weariness and not out of enthusiasm. Most people don’t understand this and now that I’ve told you, I’m not sure if you will either.

**CoCo:**

I’m not going to bullshit you. In one word, you’re degenerate.

**Zhuge:**

You may hate me, but I know that your hate for me is finite. One day, you’ll get bored of hating me, so I don’t take your hatred too seriously. I can’t take finite things too seriously, just as I cannot take this finite life we lead too seriously. The things in this world that are worth taking seriously are very few. Apart from the mighty Infinite, who else is there? No one. Actually, I shouldn’t occupy such an
important place in your heart, as I too am finite. Just like you shouldn’t hold such an important place in my heart, as you too are finite. […]

Today when I was having lunch in the canteen, I told people that I was sick and that I had been having a stomach-ache for days. Then I told them about the dead body I had seen, how it had been lying in the middle of the road. That the police had put his leather jacket over his face, and that there was a pool of blood at his side. How his motorcycle stood at the side of the road, completely intact, while the crash had killed the man. You will probably ask ‘and then, what happened then?’ There is no then. The conversation stopped here. That’s just how it was, the conversation stopped there. My illness and the death of that person who has nothing to do with us, ended in the same way at our table. No one had anything to say on these two subjects, no one cared.

CoCo:
What are we talking about, for God’s sake? Don’t go on. Why do we have to talk about something so horrible here and now? Don’t tell me about life and death, love and hate, [the self and the essential self]. We’re alive together, aren’t we? If there is something about our life, get specific: I don’t get the washing clean enough, I talk in my sleep, my novel isn’t profound enough, it’s utter rubbish — whatever. OK! I can change; I can try to do things perfectly. But for heaven’s sake, don’t say such horrible things… It’s absolutely irresponsible, I’m always dreaming of finding wings and soaring [through] the sky with you, but you’re always thinking of abandoning me and leaping alone into hell. Why?

Zhuge:
By now you should understand me, understand that when I say ‘love does not exist,’ I don’t mean that I don’t want love, but rather that I am incapable of love. […] As a matter of fact, there is no one who can really endure ‘love’; it requires an extreme sensitivity to life. Seeing all this makes me very sad, you must forgive me, because I’m living in this sadness. People who can truly love are rare, but there are a few in this world: this person from Nazareth in ancient times and Albert Schweitzer, he wrote a book called Reverence for Life that I would like you to read, but who else? Most of them can’t even love themselves, how could they possibly love someone else? […]

Today I place my hopes in compassion, compassion for all the myriad things in the natural world. Compassion is a far nobler feeling than love. I believe that when a person sees a withered tree trunk he can spontaneously feel this compassion and that this compassion is a thousand times greater than that of one healthy person telling another ‘I love you.’ What I seek in life on this earth is this kind of tree and the kind of person that cries over this plant. So many people say they like The Dream of the Red Chamber, but how many of them really understand its heroine, Lin Daiyu? Lin Daiyu truly understands the compassion I’m talking about, she has the noblest feelings in the world. […]

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Are you interested in the poet Haizi? How did Haizi say it? He said ‘Elder Sister, tonight I am thinking only of you, I’m not thinking about humankind!’ What an arrogant poet, he makes it his obligation to guard humanity, but he consciously relinquishes his duty to take a night off, thinking about his sister; how extremely, extremely difficult. But who can understand Haizi? Most people, those people who claim to love Haizi deeply, are actually laughing at him.

CoCo:

Whoever said that can drop dead! Don’t read those books anymore. You need to be among living beings. You need to do more physical work. My dad often says: ‘work makes a person healthy.’ You need sunlight and grass, and dreams of happiness and all the joy that goes with them.

(Shanghai Babe: 157-158; Sandbed: 57-61)

What we can hear in this dialogue are two positions, two attitudes to life in contemporary Shanghai. Zhuge’s indulgence in self-pity and his fatalistic attitude – “one can best just wait patiently, that which will come is bound to come, that which must go, will go” (65) – contrasts sharply with CoCo’s, whose pursuit of agency and self-determination helps her achieve her ultimate goal of becoming a famous writer.

Zhuge is more of an ‘inner-motivated’ character with a focus on ‘eternal truths,’ which makes him feel incessantly misunderstood and disparaging about himself, people and the world. He seems to be in the clutches of a sort of world-weary cynicism, were it not for the morality he so applauds in Jesus and Albert Schweitzer. Although his belief that compassion is the major motivator of moral expression, Zhuge’s compassion is mainly directed at humanity in general and at himself, but not at his intimates, as the reference to Haizi demonstrates. For all his self-loathing, Zhuge is rather obsessed with himself, and his moral consciousness seldom transforms itself into palpable, outward agency. As Zhuge explains himself to Pei Zi:

I would rather take responsibility for the entire world, than having to take responsibility for one person. I’m really like that, I want to think of life-and-death questions, of humanity, therefore I can not think too much about you. (58)

CoCo is precisely the other way around: an ‘outer-motivated’ character who always has the initiative. While not reflecting as much on moral questions, CoCo does act morally when she is confronted with friends in need. For example, when Tiantian is away and CoCo is enjoying her time alone writing her novel and meeting her lover Mark, CoCo is not plagued by feelings of guilt for cheating, but, as soon as she hears Tiantian is in trouble, she travels to him to take him home and care for him. Remarkably, the women surrounding Zhuge show the same caring devotion, so in this respect Sandbed shares the mixture of modern and traditional ethics and values that Sabina Knight (2006: 243) identifies in Shanghai Babe:

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The novel reinforces both liberal and Confucian values as the characters reinvest in personal projects and intimate, particularistic relations in response to market transitions that compromise earlier expectations of collective solidarity.

In short, where Zhuge could best be characterized as an outsider who observes his surroundings and reflects on reality, CoCo wants to experiment and, in her own words, “suck dry the juice of life like a leech, including its secret happiness and hurt, spontaneous passion and eternal longing” (88). While Zhuge dwells on the absurdity of daily life in contemporary Shanghai – “in this city people are either busy chopping large beams into wood chips or pasting wood chips into large beams” (161) – CoCo celebrates the chances it offers her and pragmatically uses the city as a source of inspiration for her novel. At the same time, CoCo is aware of the negative aspects of contemporary urban life and has her share of disappointments, but her responses to these disappointments are very different. For example, when CoCo retreats into her apartment, she does this to create another world by writing her novel, whereas Zhuge retreats “to ponder humanity”:

I could easily go for three or four days without leaving my apartment. Early to bed and early to rise meant that I had to get up in the morning and sleep at night; but to my way of thinking night time is the most delicious part of the day; in the deep stillness of the night, far removed from society, I could begin to wander: what greater pleasure can there be?

This reminds one of what Knight (2006: 216) identifies in the works of 1980s avant-garde authors:

In general, the greater the focus on interior monologue, subjective perception, and impressionism, the more disempowered the characters become. They reflect on the world and their relation to it but often conclude that they are too crippled by their recent experiences to act.

Unlike the characters in these avant-garde works, however, the younger Zhuge is not traumatized by the Cultural Revolution. Instead, his defeatism derives from his fatal disease that constantly reminds him of the temporality of life:

This despair didn’t come from outside, it came from inside. I know life has an end and death can always come. I can’t do anything against it, I can’t make it better or make it worse. I can only wait for it, let it arrive while I’m waiting, let it transform from a premonition into a reality, let it stealthily roam in the underworld until it violently storms over me. (241)
Ironically, it is not until the very end of the novel that Zhuge appears as a true self-determining agent when he decides to no longer wait for death, but to end his own life:

There isn’t any person in this world that can make a decision for you, you have to make all decisions by yourself and take responsibility for yourself. Now is the time to think about how you can take responsibility for yourself. If you have enough courage and real determination, you can accomplish your goal and accomplish life, so you can become yourself an accomplished person. To mark a full stop for yourself is the most important thing there is, there isn’t anything more important in life. Tell me, what could be more important than deciding one’s own fate? (241)

It is Pei Zi, however, who has to perform the action for Zhuge by removing the compression bandage around his thigh that stops his artery from bleeding. In addition, Pei Zi decides, against the will of Zhuge, to slash her throat with a stiletto so she will die before him and does not have to witness Zhuge’s death. Hence, even at the final moment of Zhuge’s life, he is powerlessly surrendered to a woman’s initiative.

CoCo’s story ends with a new beginning: after the successful publication of her novel she leaves for Germany on Halloween: “I like Halloween, with its romantic fantasy, the way it uses the artifice of putting on a mask and pretending to be someone else to chase away the rotten smell of death” (255). As the city of Shanghai itself - driven by the slogan ‘every year it looks new and every three years there is a tremendous change’ - she is ready for yet another transformation of her self-image, yet another romantic fantasy. While CoCo’s fear of death comes from fear of boredom (88), Zhuge fears death because it confronts him with the insignificance of the individual. In his quest for an ‘authentic’ self, Zhuge is unwilling to wear a mask and unable “to chase away the rotten smell of death.” His story ends definitively, with his deepest fear: he dies.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The novels Sandbed and Shanghai Babe exemplify the revival of the trope of Shanghai as seductive femme fatale in contemporary Chinese fiction. Both portray hedonist characters delving into the modernizing city, leading a cosmopolitan life of transnational sexual adventures and enjoying Western cultural products. Moreover, the semi-autobiographies share a self-exhibitionist tendency to break taboos and reveal private life. Nevertheless, the discourse of domestic criticism strikingly shows how the gender of the authors influences the perception of their works: while Weihui is said to be a bad example for Chinese women at large, Ge Hongbing is said to tarnish the reputation of male intellectuals; while Weihui is accused of “selling
her body,” Ge Hongbing is accused of “selling his intellect.”

All this reveals the dilemma of Shanghai’s embrace of commercialism in which writers are trapped between commercial success and scholarly recognition; between an attempt to critique contemporary society, and dependence on that very society for their success. More importantly, women writers are faced with the dilemma of wanting to attack male-dominated society – or at least conquer an equal social position – by expressing female sexual desire, but without turning *themselves* into a commodified object of male desire and/or the consumer’s gaze.

On a more metaphysical level, I would argue that these semi-autobiographies raise the question if it is at all possible to critique today’s society of the spectacle, without simply reproducing it, or being subsumed by it.¹¹¹ In the final analysis, it appeared that Weihui’s CoCo responds with a quest for (female) identity – Who am I? –, and Ge Hongbing’s Zhuge with an existential search – Why am I? Needless to say, both questions remain unanswered.

¹¹¹ I am indebted to Visser for suggesting this intriguing question on the conference “Spectacle and the City: Urbanity in Popular Culture and Art in East Asia” (Amsterdam, June 2010).