

CHINESE DÉJÀ VU:
PARALLELS BETWEEN THE URBAN POPULAR CULTURES OF
REPUBLICAN AND POST MAO CHINA

BY

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Introduction

Pop Culture Déjà vu

When I lived in Beijing for three years in the mid 1990s I would often find myself scratching my head. That head-scratching continued throughout the two subsequent years I lived in Guangzhou after moving from Beijing. I was seeing things that did not fit with my idea of China; things that reminded me of movies I had seen of China in the 1920s and 1930s. The things I saw harkened back to a time of gangsters, lounge singers, playboys and party girls, conspicuous consumption, and moral ambiguity. The urban culture of late twentieth century China, in many ways, looked to me like an updated version of the urban culture I had imagined of 1920s and 1930s China – rapidly-changing, intriguing, and decidedly unlike the China I first encountered in the 1980s.

There was a saying going around Beijing when I lived there that was a play on the old saying “Anyone who has not climbed the Great Wall is not a real Chinese,” that stated, “Any man who does not have 10 mistresses is not a real man.” I would often see some middle-aged or elderly unremarkable-looking man with two or three young beautiful women hanging on his arms while getting out of his Mercedes Benz in front of a shopping center. They would be hanging on his every word, seemingly enraptured by whatever he had to say or expectantly waiting for the next thing he would propose. I would hear friends of mine say that they knew of female classmates in their

graduate programs who were looking for a “sugar daddy” to take help fund the type of lifestyle they wanted to lead. While a foreign student in Beijing, I was propositioned by a Chinese man (the coworker of my friend’s husband) to be his mistress... right in front of his wife. These instances only fueled my interest in that earlier period of Chinese history and any connections it had with what I was observing. Little did I realize then that the thoughts that had begun to swirl around in my head would eventually become the basis for this thesis. On closer inspection, it became clear that there was a phenomenon occurring in what I will herein refer to as the post Mao era (dating from 1976 to the present) that had already occurred in urban China during the Republican era (dating from 1911 to roughly 1945). That phenomenon is the emergence and development of a spontaneous urban popular culture.

Anyone who visits Beijing, Shanghai, or other large urban centers in China today will see a cultural landscape that looks incredibly different from the one they would have witnessed just twenty years ago. Larger-than-life billboard advertisements of scantily-clad buxom women selling Wonder bras, colorful throngs of fashionably-dressed urbanites jostling for position on congested sidewalks, and a rainbow of neon lights advertising anything from discos to delicatessens line the boulevards of these cities. Snatches of conversation might reveal enticing speculation on the newest Chinese soap opera, the latest news on the love life of a Chinese rock star or actress, or how to obtain the latest underground sexposé novel.



Figure 1
Hanging lingerie advertisement in China World Trade Shopping Center – Beijing, 2006¹

Contrast those images with the mid-eighties snapshots of China taken by visitors to the People's Republic in the early years of economic reform. Those descriptions conjure up images of drone-like crowds of Chinese laborers marching to and fro like ants in their nondescript gray and blue Mao suits.² Twenty years ago a visitor to Beijing would be lucky to hear anything on the radio other than the voice of a revolutionary comrade barking out calisthenics commands to a background of martial music, or the latest news according to the Chinese Communist Party. Conversations overheard on the

street would be peppered with talk of new policies sent down from the central government and how they were presented in the latest political study session.

Indeed, China's urban cultural landscape has changed radically since the end of the Cultural Revolution, and at an exponentially increasing rate since the early 1990s. That urban cultural landscape is characterized by cultural innovation, the commodification of culture, a renegade attitude toward culture, and the manifestation of culture creation from the bottom up. While all four of those characteristics of spontaneous urban pop culture development were also apparent during the Republican era, they were sorely lacking during the pop culture wasteland of the Maoist era. That is not to say that there was *no* urban popular culture during that time, but that the urban pop culture of the Maoist era was one that was highly orchestrated and controlled by the Chinese Communist Party and the State, and was not spontaneous in its overall nature like the urban pop cultures of the post Mao and Republican eras.

In today's China, culture has even become an industry that has been packaged for consumer consumption. One such occurrence of culture becoming commodity appeared in the early 1990s, and illustrates how even political icons have become commodities of popular culture. Virtually overnight in early 1990, taxi drivers in Beijing and Shanghai started hanging large gold medallions, with the likeness of Mao Zedong carved in gold relief, from their rearview mirrors like good luck charms. Some medallions were

featured Mao's face on one side and the face of Zhou Enlai on the other. One telling conversation about what those medallions may have meant to some of the people who displayed them is found in the autobiography of outspoken Chinese actress Liu Xiaoqing, *I Did It My Way (Wode lu)*. In 1992 she spent the Spring Festival holiday in Shenzhen. She recounts her experience in this way: "During the holiday I happened to take taxis a number of times. None of the taxis had the usual talismans for good fortune hanging from their rear-view mirrors. What hung there instead was Chairman Mao's portrait. I asked the drivers about it and they all said that they hung the Chairman because he could ward off evil."³ In his book, *Shades of Mao*, Geremie Barmé likens the reemergence of the public's fascination with Mao, what he calls the "Mao Cult," to the cult of Elvis, "the King."⁴ This quote from Greil Marcus' book, *Dead Elvis: A Chronicle of a Cultural Obsession*, highlights those features that the cults of Mao and Elvis share:

When he died, the event was a kind of explosion that went off silently, in minds and hearts; out of that explosion came many fragments, edging slowly into the light, taking shape, changing shape again and again as the years went on. No one, I think, could have predicted the ubiquity, the playfulness, the perversity, the terror, and the fun of this, of Elvis Presley's second life: a great, common conversation, sometimes, a conversation between specters and fans, made out of songs, art works, books, movies, dreams... In either form it was – is – a story that needed no authoritative voice, no narrator, a story that flourishes precisely because it is free of any such thing, a story that told itself.⁵

Not only did the medallions appear, but also a variety of “Mao sportswear” – tee shirts, sweatshirts and canvas bags with a silk-screen of Mao’s profile or with the words “serve the people” (*wei renmin fuwu*) – was available for purchase in the street markets of Beijing. The availability of such items of pop nostalgia speaks to the resourcefulness of China’s youth culture industry in capitalizing on the Mao Cult’s popularity with the new “teeny-bopper” market. Many of the people consuming Mao products were people who were unfamiliar with the Maoist era – adolescents and people in their early twenties.⁶ How strange, and profitable, that a man who was once the supreme political icon of socialist China experienced a resurgence of popularity, resurfacing as an icon of popular culture. Mao’s currency as a pop culture icon is just as apparent today as it was back in the early 90s.



Figure 2

Canvas Mao handbag purchased from street vendor on Wangfujing – Beijing, 2006



Figure 3

Lei Feng t-shirt purchased from street vendor on Wangfujing – Beijing, 2006

A more recent occurrence of political nostalgia turned cultural commodity can be seen in the resurgence in the popularity of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) most-beloved model soldier, Lei Feng. His cool factor is such that his likeness is appearing not only on tee shirts sported by dancers in Beijing and Shanghai nightclubs, but it is also appearing on Chinese skateboards and in urban street graffiti. One Chinese skateboard company has co-opted Lei Feng's exhortation to, "serve the people" by naming their company The People's Skateboards (*Shehui*) and using the words "serve the people" as their brand's tag line. The People's Skateboards, based in Beijing, feature either a silhouette of Lei Feng in his winter PLA hat

(with flaps flying), or a revolutionary pose of workers and peasants laboring for the socialist good on the bottoms of their skateboard decks.⁷ Although the skateboarding community is not as large in China as it is in the States, per capita, The People's Skateboards is doing a banner business and even has its own storefront in Beijing's Chaoyang District.



Figure 4
Two of the founders of The People's Skateboards – Beijing, 2006



Figure 5
Skateboard Shop – Beijing, 2006



Figure 6
The People's Skateboards' best-selling Lei Feng deck

According to Geremie Barmé, even dissent has become a commodity in China – one with its own niche-market.

“Underground art, novels, rock and roll and the ‘alternative’ film industry in China are all too aware of the appeal both at home and abroad of the Chinese rebel voice. Dissidence has become a ‘genre’ (the ‘dissident label’), and a ‘packaged dissent’, which is commodified and sold like any other product.”⁸

He goes on to point out that for such products to appeal to consumers of the dissident genre they must attract enough criticism from official censors to

qualify as 'dissident', but must still make it through the same censor's office in such a way that there is still a product left to sell on the Chinese market.

Another popular genre of cultural products is that of the urban alternative (*linglei*), or fringe culture – representing anyone who falls outside the mainstream, claims to fall outside the mainstream, or who is truly disenfranchised.⁹ Fringe culture in urban China today is cool, and it sells. Such a culture industry, according to Barmé, not only caters to the market, but also actually helps to produce that market by manufacturing a desire for such products.¹⁰

Not only has Chinese culture been changing radically, but the social changes that accompany this cultural change are also more and more evident to China's leaders and the Chinese public. Officials are increasingly embarrassed by figures showing that the phenomenon of sexual promiscuity among young urban Chinese is widespread and on the rise.¹¹ As a result, there has been an increase in the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, the number of unmarried Chinese women using birth control, and the number of pregnancies among single women.¹² Drug use and alcoholism, addictions that had all but disappeared during the Maoist era, are increasing at alarming rates.¹³ Whether these social changes are fueling the trends in pop culture development more than the development of pop culture is fueling these social changes is unclear. What *is* clear is that spontaneous urban popular culture

is alive and well today in China, and it is not the first incidence of such a phenomenon in modern Chinese history.

Thesis

Many writings on Chinese cultural development over the last twenty years have focused on the radical changes that have occurred on the mainland. The bulk of those writings herald the novelty of these changes and what may be considered as a spontaneous emergence and development of an urban popular culture in China. One sentiment that is common among a number of these writings is that China has ventured into virgin and unexplored territory – that this spontaneous emergence of urban pop culture is the first of its kind to occur in modern Chinese history.¹⁴

I believe that the emergence and development of spontaneous urban popular culture in post Mao era China is the second occurrence of this phenomenon in modern Chinese history. The conditions that made China ripe for spontaneous urban pop culture development, the main messages expressed through urban popular culture, and the identity types celebrated through the urban popular culture of the Republican and post Mao eras, while not identical in appearance, are strikingly similar, representing two sides of the same coin. In order to develop this assertion more fully, this thesis examines three of the primary features of the urban pop culture of each era that are similar. First, this thesis examines the context of sociopolitical

conditions present during both eras that made China ripe for the emergence of spontaneous urban pop culture. Second is the examination of the similar messages conveyed through the urban popular cultures of both eras that focus on the theme of identity – exploring the similarities between identity messages about individualism and cosmopolitanism. Third, this thesis then examines the similar identity types (which could be called stereotypes) presented and celebrated through the urban pop culture of both eras. The assertion of this thesis is that these three factors are similar enough in the popular cultures of both eras as to suggest that they represent the emergence of the same type of phenomenon. Why these three similar factors exist at two separate periods of Chinese history, while fascinating, is not the major concern of this thesis. The mere fact *that* they exist, and that they are so similar, is.

Key Terms and Definitions

Before outlining the thesis in more detail, the definition of popular culture and other key terms must be addressed. Equally important are those issues and concepts that are naturally related to this topic, yet fall outside the scope of this thesis.

Popular culture, for the purpose of this thesis, refers to “culture which originates from the people,” or mass culture.¹⁵ It is not a culture that is imposed from above, but is the authentic spontaneous culture of the people.¹⁶

This definition coincides with the idea of the *spontaneous* nature of pop culture development – that it occurs and thrives without the deliberate orchestrations or calculated machinations of the state or any other person or group who has authority over the people.¹⁷ This spontaneous pop culture development is both bottom-up, from a grassroots level, and top-down, with the top consisting of culture elites, those non elites who have the capital to fund their pop culture ventures, and various culture companies (which may be working in accordance *with* the regulations of the state, but not *for* the state),. It is not planned, prompted, or contrived by the state. The primary force that shapes or steers the course of its development is the people (not the state), and those who create and participate in it do so voluntarily. It is the people, and not solely their government, beginning to tell their own stories and the story of China, and packaging it for consumption.

The geographical context of this paper is *China*, by which I am referring not to greater China or a China that includes Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao, but mainland China. I also clearly refer to *urban* China, specifically, the major metropolitan areas of China with a population of at least one million people. However, practical considerations make it necessary to limit my detailed focus to the urban pop cultures of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. While these three cities do not provide the definitive view of urban pop culture throughout China, they are generally representative of the overall pop culture scene in most of urban China.

The term *urban Chinese* (or *Chinese urbanites*) refers to those who live in these metropolitan areas, and has a different meaning for each of the time periods covered in the paper. For the Republican era, this term refers mostly to urban elites – intellectuals and those people whose social status had been elevated or determined by education, wealth or social status. It also refers to those considered “petty urbanites” (*xiao shimin*) – “literate clerks and apprentices in trade, manufacturing, the professions, and public and private sectors, who were members of the “old” as well as the “new” middle classes.”¹⁸ For the post Mao era, the term *urbanite* simply refers to those Chinese who reside in metropolitan areas on a permanent or near-permanent basis.

We must also consider the *vehicles* of pop culture. A vehicle of pop culture, as used in this thesis, is the means by which a culture-maker transmits their message to the public forum. The vehicles of pop culture expression generally fall into three broad categories – the arts, the media, and the popular press. The venues and urban spaces that have grown up around each vehicle, and the people who occupied and utilized those spaces, became a means of transmitting popular culture to the urban public as well. The arts refer to literature, music, theatre, film, language, etc. Media would include television, radio, advertising, and the Internet, to give a partial list. The popular press refers to magazines, newspapers, and online versions of both. There is one other vehicle of pop culture expression that does not fall

under any of the broad categories just mentioned, and that is the vehicle of a unique individual's life. By that, I mean the actual day-to-day life of an individual in Chinese society who is of some notoriety. The fact of their notoriety and the potential influence they have on those who observe their lives, makes them another vehicle of pop culture expression. This thesis is by no means a comprehensive study of any one or all of these vehicles of pop culture expression, but a selection of representative items that are illustrative of the parallelism between the urban pop cultures of both eras.

This thesis is not meant to be a comprehensive study of the urban pop cultures of both eras, but a look at representative examples from the popular cultures of each era that illustrate broad parallels between the two in the context, the messages on identity, and the celebrated identity types of urban popular culture. It is not the intention of this thesis to prove that the urban pop cultures of both eras are identical, but to show that they are similar enough to be considered as two manifestations of the same phenomenon. Popular culture, especially in China, is a shifting terrain; a target that moves so quickly that its composition cannot be easily quantified. Through this thesis I am attempting to identify parallel aspects of popular culture during two specific periods of time. Indeed, because of the rapidly changing nature of Chinese urban pop culture I am confident that at the time this thesis is completed, certain aspects of my data will already be considered somewhat dated and timeworn.¹⁹

Design and Approach

The central topic of this thesis shows two separate moments in modern Chinese history where similar though not identical manifestations of the same phenomenon materialized. The kinship between the popular cultures of urban China during the Republican and post Mao eras are evidenced through the three primary factors of: the contextual factors making China ripe for the emergence of spontaneous urban pop culture; the identity messages conveyed through urban pop culture; and the identity types celebrated through urban pop culture. Chapter one outlines the similar sociopolitical conditions present in both eras that made China ripe for the emergence of spontaneous urban pop culture. Chapters two and three address the similar messages on identity that are conveyed through the urban pop culture of both eras; chapter two deals with identity messages from both eras about individualism while chapter three deals with identity messages from both eras about cosmopolitanism. Chapter four features the similar identity types presented and celebrated through the urban pop culture of both eras. Each of these three chapters cites specific examples from the urban pop culture of both eras, providing excerpts from original works where possible. Many of the examples I have used are ones that feature explicit sexual content. The reason for this is twofold: first, sex is extremely provocative – the pop culture examples that feature sexual content, and the type of sexual content they feature, draw attention to how different those pop culture works are from

those of the mainstream culture of the imperial era and the Maoist era; and second, sex is a powerfully tangible expression of individuality – an expression of individuality that had not been discussed so openly by so many people in each of the historical eras preceding the Republican and post Mao eras.

An interesting contradiction emerged as I wrote chapters two, three, and four. While culture makers of both eras were singing the praises of individuality and plurality, they also created many of their characters to conform to some degree to a preconceived “type” or recognizable demographic, thus reinforcing stereotypes (though they were new stereotypes) among those who consumed pop culture. Could it be that the journey from being part of a conformist collective, through the celebration of one’s unique individuality eventually leads to a place where one understands what she values and desires, and as a result, is better-equipped to connect with others of similar values and desires? I do not know if pop culture makers intended to identify their characters with a recognizable demographic at the time they created them, or if it was an inadvertent consequence of creating characters based on real life experiences, but I will address this contradiction a bit more in chapter four when I discuss the identity types that appear most often in the pop culture of both eras. Lastly, chapter five is a summary of the most obvious ways in which the urban pop culture of the post Mao era parallels the urban pop culture of the Republican era and the significance of such parallels.

Before examining specific pop culture examples from both eras, we must examine the context in which urban pop culture emerged in both eras. Chapter one lays out that context by examining four sociopolitical factors that contributed to preparing the cultural soil that made both eras ripe for the emergence and development of spontaneous urban popular culture – a major shift in the locus of moral authority and social control, technological advances, rapid economic growth, and the influx of foreign influences.²⁰

Notes

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- ¹ All photos were taken by the author unless otherwise noted.
- ² Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl Wudunn, *China Wakes* (New York: Random House, 1994), 3.
- ³ Geremie Barmé, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader* (London: M.E. Sharp, 1996), 176.
- ⁴ Barmé, *Shades of Mao*, 47.
- ⁵ Griel Marcus, *Dead Elvis: A Chronicle of a Cultural Obsession* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), xii-xiv.
- ⁶ Geremie Barmé, "Soft Porn, Packaged Dissent, and Nationalism: Notes on Chinese Culture in the 1990s," *Current History*, 93 (1994): 272.
- ⁷ See Figures 4-6.
- ⁸ Barmé, *Current History*, 270-273.
- ⁹ Hongling Chen, "Linglei Zhong de Linglei Renwu," *Journal of Shaoyang University*, 3 (2004): 68-69.
- ¹⁰ Barmé, *Current History*, 270.
- ¹¹ "China's Youth Wants Sexual Freedom," *BBC Online*, June 15, 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/369933.stm>. (accessed August 26, 2006)
- ¹² Kristina Sivelle, "Chinese Women and Their Contraceptive Choices," *China Daily Online*, January 18, 2005, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-01/18/content_410003.htm.
- ¹³ "China's Youngsters Are Turning On, Tuning Out," *Time Asia Online*, October 23, 2000, http://www.time.com/time/asia/features/youngchina/g.crackdown_sb1.html.
- ¹⁴ Several sources on popular culture in China during the last twenty years refer to the "unprecedented changes" that China is experiencing, as if these changes are the first of their kind in China. While some aspects of change in today's China are obviously unprecedented (especially in scale), the phenomenon of a burgeoning urban popular culture is not. The sources that refer to the journey of urban pop culture development in China today as a virgin one are too numerous to mention, but one that develops that idea is by Jiaying Zha, entitled *China Pop: How Soap Operas, Tabloids, and Bestsellers Are Transforming a Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 3-17.
- ¹⁵ John Storey, *An Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 12.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Frederic Wakeman and Wen-Hsin Yeh, *Shanghai Sojourners* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1992), 191.
- ¹⁹ Several concepts and issues that naturally arise from studying the topic of Chinese urban popular culture fall outside the scope of this thesis. This thesis is not intended to be a comprehensive chronicling or extensive examination of the events and motivations of the May Fourth Movement or the Tiananmen Square Democracy Movement and the squelching of those student protests. Likewise, the intention of this thesis does not include extensive research on the direct relationship between politics and culture. Politics is considered as only one of many factors that contributed to the creation of a general atmosphere that made China more conducive to the emergence and development of urban pop culture.
- This study of emergent popular culture in the Republican and post Mao eras is not meant to be a comprehensive one. For the purpose of this thesis both eras of urban popular culture are examined in order to illustrate how they represent two similar though not identical manifestations of the same phenomenon. Therefore, the early years of fledgling urban pop culture that occurred prior to the catalysts of the May Fourth Incident in 1919 and the Tiananmen Square protest of 1989 are not given extensive treatment. Those periods are acknowledged, but are not the focus of this thesis.

The period of Chinese history from 1949 to 1976 was one of dramatic change for Chinese culture and the Chinese people. It is not the claim of this thesis that popular culture did not exist during that period, but that it was *primarily* a popular culture that resulted from the deliberate orchestrations and calculated machinations of the state for the purpose of furthering the mass political campaigns that characterized life in Maoist China.

Whatever spontaneous popular culture existed during that period did not contain the four components mentioned above. The mass culture of the period could not be deemed spontaneous popular culture under the terms presented above, and existed purely under the controlling thumb of the Party bureaucracy. While popular culture during the Maoist era is a fascinating subject, it falls outside the scope of this thesis, and thus, is only mentioned incidentally.

²⁰ While whole chapters could be devoted to each of these factors, a brief overview of each is provided solely for the purpose of context. A full treatment of each or all of these factors falls outside the scope of this thesis.

Chapter 1

Context for Cultural Change

The examination of the popular cultures of urban China during the Republican and post Mao eras must begin by noting the obvious contrast between the popular culture of these two periods and the cultural systems that prevailed throughout China during the historical period that immediately preceded each. While different in substance, the mass cultures of the late imperial era and the Maoist era were established and predicated upon the same two principles – the homogeneity and superiority of Chinese culture and of the Chinese people. Homogeneity was based on the ideal that all Chinese were culturally the same and valued the same things in life as their leaders. Theoretically, they would live their lives in strict accordance with one set of values – resulting in a very top-down management of society and, hence, order. Embedded within that concept was the conviction that the Chinese people were not only a homogeneous people, but also a unique people who had nothing significant in common with anyone or anything outside of their culture (in the imperial era) or country (in the Maoist era), and were obviously superior people with a superior culture. During the imperial era, the best illustration of this principle is found in the word most commonly used to denote a non-Chinese person – foreign devil (*yang guizi*). During the Maoist era, the Chinese people were told by their leaders that their superiority was not only cultural, but also political. This belief was at the heart of the basic

distrust of foreigners and all things non-Chinese. Even socialism was Sinicized by China's political leaders.

Because of the economic, technological, political and social changes that fed the development of mass popular culture in urban China during the Republican and post Mao eras, these two bedrocks of Chinese culture, homogeneity and superiority, began to crumble under the sheer plurality of ideas that rushed in and the resulting identification of more and more Chinese with the lives and concerns of those living in the non-Chinese world. It also resulted in the creation and feeding of a desire within the hearts of many urban Chinese – a desire to test the limits within which life had been lived in China, and to possibly expand or even erase the borders within which that life had been lived.

There had been a thin stream of the type of spontaneous urban popular culture that this thesis explores trickling into Chinese society during the late Qing Dynasty, as well as during the late years of the Cultural Revolution. Once the Republic of China was established in 1911, and the economic reform policies of 1978 were begun in earnest, that stream began to swell, quickly growing into a river. With the impetus of the student movements of May 4, 1919 and June 4, 1989, respectively, that popular culture river began to widen and rage, cutting indelibly through the Chinese urban landscape.

The emergence and development of popular culture in urban China during the Republican and post Mao eras represented and still represents a new forum for spontaneous public exploration and expression. That public exploration and expression extended to sharing new ideas, opinions, and ways of life, to wrestling in a public forum with questions of both an individual and collective nature, and to offering an alternate venue for didactic discourse. Such an opportunity was especially welcome, at least by some, after an extended period of personal or collective censure imposed by Confucian traditionalism or Maoist extremism.

In order to understand why urban pop culture emerged in Republican and post Mao China, we must also examine the context within which and from which Chinese urban pop culture began to thrive. The remainder of this chapter will paint the larger picture of how this phenomenon occurred by demonstrating the common chronological pattern for urban pop culture development, and by highlighting the context in which four primary sociopolitical factors made China ripe for urban pop cultural development in both eras.

The Ripening of Republican China

The first wave of the chronological pattern through which spontaneous urban pop culture emerged began with one of the first significant political shifts in twentieth century China – the end of the Chinese imperial system and

the founding of the Republic of China (ROC) on October 10, 1911¹ For the first time in modern history China willingly opened its doors wide, and began the process of assuming its place upon the world stage. The political revolution also swept a cultural revolution into China that came to pursue as its mission the replacement of traditional Confucian culture. That movement, appropriately named the New Culture Movement, started as a discourse on whether or not those aspects of Confucian culture that had not been supplanted by republicanism and nationalism needed to be salvaged to maintain stability. The early years of the New Culture Movement were marked by extensive debate on the evils or benefits of Confucian culture (namely, ethics), but as the movement continued to gain momentum, especially with the impetus of the May Fourth Incident of 1919, those who favored a wholesale destruction of Confucian culture and its influence in the daily life of the Chinese people won out and dominated the discourse.²

Less than a decade after the founding of the Republic of China, public student-led protests erupted in Beijing, Shanghai, and other major Chinese cities on May 4, 1919, which came to be known as the May Fourth Incident. Chinese students responded to their government's capitulation to the unfair terms of the Versailles Agreement reached by the Allies at the end of World War One, and took to the streets to demonstrate. The students called for five resolutions, the most immediate of which called on their government to reject the terms of Versailles that allowed Japan to acquire those concessions on

the Chinese mainland formerly held by Germany. The students also called for Chinese citizens to make their antipathy known by joining the demonstrations and by boycotting foreign-made goods, especially those from Japan. The demonstrations lasted for only one day, but several violent clashes occurred with police, resulting in injuries on both sides and the death of one student. By the evening of May 4th, most of those involved in the demonstrations had dispersed. Those who remained in the streets were arrested.³

Even though the demonstrations of May Fourth ended the same day they began, they succeeded, in part, by capturing the attention and imagination of many urban Chinese. Another of the five resolutions was a call to “awaken the masses all over the country to an awareness of China’s plight.” The May Fourth demonstrations and the recognition of China’s plight touched a nerve of collective discontent⁴ that had already existed but had yet to be openly acknowledged among a large number of Chinese urbanites. At the same time, the demonstrations also expressed a collective sense of hope for a better China. In the wake of those demonstrations and the optimistic discontent that they revealed, a revolution that changed the cultural landscape of society and daily life began to spread throughout urban China. That cultural revolution, the May Fourth Movement (as part of the greater New Culture Movement), was the impetus of the first wave of spontaneous urban pop culture development in modern China.⁵

After the establishment of the ROC in 1911, the modernization and industrialization of the country was the critical order of business. The spirit of the May Fourth Movement was evident in the enthusiasm with which China's intellectuals embraced Western education models and the western concepts of nationalism and individualism. Western educational models appealed to China's intellectuals due to its emphasis on the study of science and mathematics, and the hope that both would provide key components to modernization and industrialization. For many urban intellectuals nationalism became the skeleton upon which they would flesh out this new social experiment of building a modern and self-reliant nation full of self-reliant citizens.⁶

The hunger for progress and cultural liberation for the individual as well as society, and the collective need for a previously repressed public for open discourse and personal expression, fueled the desire to create an atmosphere where experimentation and discovery were encouraged. In such an atmosphere the flow of ideas would be freer and less impeded by the rigid social and moral constraints of traditional Chinese culture. Those hungers and desires, along with the embryonic formation of a public consciousness of citizenship, nationalism and globalization, combined forcefully to change the very mindset of urban Chinese and the context in which they lived. The following section examines the context in which spontaneous urban popular culture emerged. Four of the sociopolitical factors that contributed to

preparing the cultural soil that made Republican era China ripe for spontaneous urban pop culture emergence and development are a major shift in the locus of moral authority and social control, technological advances, rapid economic growth, and the influx of foreign influences.⁷

Shift in the Locus of Moral Authority and Social Control

Chinese culture and society experienced dramatic shifts in the early years of the Republican era that fundamentally altered the daily life of large numbers of Chinese citizens; urbanites in particular. In each case these shifts represented a partial dissolution of the conventions that had previously governed the course and activities of everyday life. These shifts began to reshape the structure and institutions of daily life and called into question the moral authority of the dominant Confucian culture. The dramatic moral and societal shift that marked the periods immediately prior to and during the Republican era was more than two thousand years in the making. Several small cries for change were made in the late years of the Qing and in the early years of the Republic, but the May Fourth Movement, and the even larger New Culture Movement that encompassed it, called for modernization and widespread change in Chinese culture on a monumental scale. Its anthem was a call for nothing less than the de-Confucianization of Chinese culture and society, and a shift of the locus of moral authority and social control away from Confucianism and traditional Chinese values.⁸

Confucian philosophy had been the moral and social barometer of Chinese life for centuries. The hierarchy of authority and relationships, private thought, social propriety, and public ceremony were all governed by a narrow code of conduct, which provided the proper and appropriate response to any given situation.⁹ During the Republican era, particularly after the onset of the May Fourth Movement, Confucianism's monopoly on moral authority was openly called into question. The May Fourth Movement, as part of the broader New Culture Movement, is described as a multi-pronged attack on "everything from China's past that had smothered progress and creativity" – an attack on "tradition for the sake of tradition." Urban intellectuals and students constituted the main foot soldiers of this new cultural movement. Their hope was to take the best aspects of Chinese culture and blend them with the best of Western science, Western education and Western values. Those aspects of Chinese culture that were most oppressive to individual exploration, expression, and progress, were likewise considered oppressive to the progress of the nation. Hence, there was a need to replace Confucian values with more liberal (i.e. modern) values that would not strangle or impede the progress of the individual or the nation.¹⁰

How did China's urban elites go about shifting the locus of moral authority and social control away from Confucianism? They challenged Confucianism in three main spheres of life. The first sphere was that of traditional values. The second sphere was one of the cornerstones of

Confucian social hierarchy, the position and inaccessibility of the scholarly elite. The third sphere included the institutions of marriage and the family.

First, China's urban elite challenged the sphere of traditional values by calling for people to reject such values and replace them with a new philosophy of life. China would best be served, the urban elite maintained, by encouraging its citizens to explore and express their best hopes for personal progress and the progress of the country, and giving them the corresponding freedom to do so, outside the narrow confines of Confucian values.¹¹

However, the question of what would replace the moral authority of Confucianism created a moral and ethical vacuum for those Chinese who embraced the "new culture." If Confucianism and traditional values were no longer to be trusted, then what values would provide the best standard for moral decision-making? Individuals were exhorted to choose for themselves the values upon which they would base their decisions from the large variety of competing ideas in the arena of public discourse.¹²

Second, China's urban elite sought to eradicate the Confucian notion of the scholar elite by bringing Chinese intellectuals into closer contact and association with average Chinese through a literary revolution. The central principle of the literary revolution was a change in the language of literature from classical Chinese to the vernacular, or *baihua*. That one change made literature and various forms of the popular press that were previously inaccessible to the average Chinese, more available. In 1920 the Ministry of

Education in Beijing decreed that *baihua* would be the language taught in public schools, and by the 1930s almost all writing was in some form of *baihua*.¹³

Third, urban intellectuals further challenged the formality and rigidity of Confucianism by rejecting Confucian social conventions and the Confucian family structure.¹⁴ For those who made that change, a whole world of possibilities opened before them. Social conventions that once prohibited close associations between people of different classes or different genders no longer governed the interactions of daily life. Because of the greater freedom of boys, girls, men and women to associate with whom they chose, two institutions in China were changed indelibly – education and marriage. Coeducational schools, which offered the same learning opportunities to women as to men, began to appear on the urban Chinese landscape. Probably even more revolutionary was the concept of free love, which allowed for individuals to choose for themselves whom to marry, if indeed they chose to marry at all, and the establishment of a nuclear family residence, apart from the extended family.¹⁵

Technological Advances

Several technological advances occurred during the late years of the Qing and during the Republican era that contributed to and accelerated the development of urban popular culture through the dissemination of new ideas

and products. One of the primary technological advances was the mechanization of the printing press. This one innovation led to the burgeoning of print capitalism and the modern press in China.¹⁶

Foreign-trained Chinese intelligentsia founded literally hundreds of magazines devoted to introducing Western culture and thought, and within six months of the May Fourth Incident there were already over four hundred new periodicals on the scene, all written in the vernacular.¹⁷ China's modern press provided a public forum for the discussion of national, social, and intellectual concerns. Translations of books (both fiction and non-fiction), newspapers, and other periodicals from Western languages also became a major industry.¹⁸

The invention of photography and its adoption by modern magazines and newspapers only fueled public interest in the written words accompanying photos in Chinese periodicals.¹⁹ The availability of radio and the talking film made news and entertainment more accessible to the public – even the illiterate urban public. An entire industry developed around the production and distribution of sound movies, necessitating the building of theatres and creating a market for the ever-popular movie magazine and movie memorabilia.²⁰

Finally, technological advances in transportation expanded the markets new goods and information could reach, considerably cutting down the distribution time for both. The arrival of the automobile in China, and the

continued expansion of the railway system facilitated the greater mobility of people, products, and information.²¹

Rapid Economic Growth

The Republican era also experienced rapid economic growth, which became a foundational component in the development of urban popular culture. The initial stimulus of economic growth was the global increase in the price of goods and raw materials created by World War One. Chinese entrepreneurs took advantage of the preoccupation of European businesses with the war, and soon replaced many European goods and services with their own in the Chinese market. As a result of this opportunity and a change in Chinese attitudes toward the merchant class and the open pursuit of economic gain, which were previously acknowledged with disdain, a successful Chinese business class began to emerge between 1911 and 1937. Not only did a business class emerge in China, but a growing middle class also began to emerge in urban China.²²

As culture became more commodified, it also became a more attractive investment, which encouraged the growth of several culture industries – the printing and publishing industries, and the entertainment industry, especially the movie industry. As a result of the success of print capitalism, large numbers of literary societies, journals, newspapers, & publishing companies sprang up and formed the necessary background of a

phenomenon generally known as *wentan*, or the literary scene, and more entertainment venues began to dot the urban landscape, such as dance halls, movie theaters, and coffee houses.²³ The advertising industry also grew...

Influx of Foreign Influences

Another factor that made the emergence and growth of urban popular culture possible, was the massive influx of foreign influence into Chinese society during the Republican era, and especially after the May Fourth Incident in 1919. This influx occurred as China was emerging from self-imposed isolation from the outside world that was sacrosanct during the Qing Dynasty.

The rapid incursion of Western thought and culture added even more raw material to fuel the public intellectual and philosophical disputes in the years immediately following the May Fourth Incident of 1919. The greater availability of foreign literature translated into Chinese and the attention the Chinese urban elite gave to Western ideas made this possible.²⁴ A new “May Fourth” vocabulary sprang up overnight with the introduction of several foreign “isms” into the Chinese lexicon – nationalism, universalism, Marxism, humanism, feminism, etc. to name just a few. One of the most foreign of these isms, however, was individualism. Individualism, and the liberation of the individual, became one of the dominant themes of the May Fourth Movement.²⁵

Three different yet interrelated strands of experimentalism were introduced during the Republican era – scientific experimentalism, philosophical experimentalism, and literary experimentalism. Lu Xun was a big proponent of literary experimentalism, and took an iconoclastic stance in the valorization of all things new.²⁶ His example (and the example of others like him) captured the attention and admiration of numerous young men and women. Attracted by the lifestyle and the popularity of the works of Lu Xun and other vocational literati, more people than ever before began to look at literature as a vocation, and sought to make that their life ambition.²⁷

Western educational and management methods, the introduction of “Mr. Science” and “Mr. Democracy” to the Chinese mindset, and the promotion of Western social customs forever changed interaction between urban Chinese men and women. By adopting the Western attitude toward “free love”, as opposed to succumbing to a marriage arranged by the family patriarch, urban men and women in Republican China experienced greater social freedom in their interactions with one another. Greater economic opportunity also allowed for greater social mobility, especially of urban women, and began to break the hold traditional notions of class-consciousness had formerly had on social intercourse.²⁸ One other foreign influence that made the emergence of urban popular culture in China possible was the inspiration provided by Japan’s economic and social transformation during the Meiji Restoration period (1868). Japan was one Asian country that

had “westernized” successfully, and was a reminder of the possibilities that could be achieved through modernization and the resulting cultural transformation it brought.²⁹ As a result of Japan’s example, and the example of modernized Western countries, Chinese students began to leave in droves for university campuses abroad. Many not only brought their degrees back to China, but also their modern sensibilities of life in Japan and the West.³⁰

The four sociopolitical factors outlined above are by no means comprehensive, but their contribution to making Republican era China ripe for the emergence and development of a spontaneous urban popular culture is an obvious one. The following section illustrates how these same factors contributed to making China in the post Mao era ripe for a similar (though not identical) emergence and development of spontaneous urban popular culture.

The Ripening of Post Mao China

The chronological pattern of urban pop culture development displayed in the Republican era is paralleled in a similar pattern in the post Mao era. The second wave of this chronological pattern began with the dramatic political shift that occurred with the end of the Cultural Revolution. In 1976 the Chinese government was in a relative state of uncertainty. The country was reeling from the deaths of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, and from the arrest and trial of the “Gang of Four”. Deng Xiaoping and his pro reform supporters spent their first few years in power maneuvering to stay there.

Rapid economic growth threatened to outstrip the government's ability to harness it, and the central government of the PRC was, therefore, preoccupied with the immense undertaking of moving the country forward on the road to progress – so much so that functions of social and political control received much less attention than during the Maoist years.

Optimism for political change had been building slowly along with the economic changes of the 1980s. Indeed, since the economic reforms began in 1978, such political optimism occasionally reared its embarrassing head in the form of democracy wall posters and small-scale demonstrations.³¹ The fullness of this optimism was expressed in the spring of 1989, when students took to the streets of Beijing demanding a dialogue with Party leaders on issues ranging from official corruption to a call for democratic elections for government positions.³² The suppression of the student demonstrations on June 4, however, squelched the frenetic optimism exhibited throughout urban China during those short six and a half weeks of “Beijing Spring.” Slowly, as China began to recover from the surreal events of the spring and early summer of 1989, the hope for political change was supplanted by a resignation among many of China's urbanites that was distinctly apolitical in nature, and focused on a more self-serving approach to life. If political change could not be affected through collective effort, then an individual could at least concentrate on serving his own interests, and those of his family. The public expression of that resignation was the primary impetus that amplified and

advanced the development of spontaneous urban pop culture during the post Mao era.

The following section will examine the same four sociopolitical factors that contributed to the emergence and development of a spontaneous urban popular culture in the Republican era, as they are manifest in the post Mao era. The four factors are a major shift in the locus of moral authority and social control, technological advances, rapid economic growth, and the influx of foreign influences.

Shift in the Locus of Moral Authority and Social Control

The major moral and societal shift that marked the period dating from the beginning of the economic reforms instituted in 1978 to the present is one that required a clear-cut departure from thirty years of Maoist ideology. The intent of the reforms of the Chinese Communist Party was to decentralize state control of the economy in order to stimulate and fuel economic growth.³³ Up to that point the barometer for moral and social control among the Chinese people had been the Party and its interpretation of Maoist ideology; implemented and overseen by the Party's watchdog – the work unit. Ironically, one of the most compelling effects of the reforms was a significant de-politicization of daily life for the average Chinese which shifted the locus of moral authority and social control away from the Party, and hence, away from the work unit. This de-politicization occurred for a number of reasons, the

chief of which was the weakening of the basic structure of political control – the work unit, or *danwei* – through decentralization. Since the founding of the People’s Republic, every urban Chinese was registered as a member of the unit with which he or she worked.³⁴ The work unit’s party leaders exercised tremendous power and control over the lives its members. As managers and administrators of many of the social welfare benefits accorded to work unit members such as housing assignments, medical care, rudimentary education, allocation of food staples, and retirement benefits, their control was very real. Their approval was also required for a wide range of privileges – including those educational opportunities in addition to rudimentary education, permission to marry, permission to have a child, and travel (both domestic and foreign), to name some of the more obvious ones.³⁵

The housing assignments and living arrangements provided by the work unit to its members added a special and personal measure of control, due to the close physical proximity within which fellow work unit members lived.³⁶ The work unit was also responsible for the political education of its members and their families. Political directives or mass political campaigns that originated at the central government level passed directly through each respective bureaucratic level all the way down to the city or village level, finally ending with grass roots implementation at the work unit level. Through a variety of work unit-sponsored activities and political study sessions, coupled with the close living conditions, compliance with the political and

social expectations set forth by the party was closely monitored.³⁷ In a society where status was measured by political loyalty and the revolutionary nature of your class background, one's political awareness and understanding of the nuances of political acceptance had to be finely tuned, in the interest of self-preservation.

Neighborhood committees were another tool that was employed for the informal gathering of information and monitoring of urban residents. Those on the committee reported any unusual or suspicious activities, attitudes, or associations of work unit members to their superiors. Any member of the work unit could report another member for "suspicions" of wrongdoing or wrong thought, and such people were often rewarded for their zeal. All it would take to cause a problem for you was for someone to raise the question of your loyalty.³⁸ As if your own ideological and political purity was not enough of a burden, it was expected that everyone would take responsibility for the ideological purity of those with whom they associated. A common practice employed within work units was to pit coworkers against one another by exhorting them to be one another's political conscience. Not reporting those who deviated from political convention could even be considered as a counter-revolutionary crime, for "protecting an enemy of the people." Practically every aspect of daily life had a political component associated to it, from your opinion about the mundane to your attitude toward work and your

coworkers. Nothing was too small or insignificant to escape scrutiny, and dissociating oneself from political participation was not an option.³⁹

As a result of greater earning potential in the Chinese private sector and the economic instability of many state owned enterprises since the economic reforms began in 1978, the work unit has faltered as the key institution for social and political control in urban China. The “iron rice bowl” of the state is no longer as strong as it once was, now that state-owned enterprises have to compete in the open market with private enterprises for their share of profits.⁴⁰ Therefore the work unit no longer has the luxury to focus its energy on monitoring and controlling the daily lives of its members as it once did, especially as it relates to political education, and must instead focus on continuing to justify its existence through profits. Many functions originally carried out by the work unit are no longer guaranteed by all work units, unless the work unit in question is an exceptionally profitable or essential one.⁴¹ Job placement for every urban Chinese, the allocation of housing, granting permission to marry, to have children, to travel, etc. – many of those responsibilities are falling into the hands of the individual in an increasing number of cases. Those fortunate enough to have higher disposable incomes are also less reliant on a state-run work unit to provide for them. As a result these people have greater freedom of movement geographically, and greater freedom of choice in daily life decisions. Those with higher disposable incomes are able to purchase some greater measure

of privacy by purchasing a private space in which to live. This is particularly important in terms of exploring one's identity through one's sexuality.

Rapid Economic Growth

Once economic reforms were instituted in 1978, the country gradually made a shift away from the state-planned and state-controlled economy that it had operated under since the founding of the PRC. A policy of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” and the Four Modernizations guided the economic reforms.⁴² Socialism with Chinese characteristics became a convenient euphemism for encouraging small-scale capitalism, allowing the development of a free market economy in a socialist system, and relying on foreign investment and technology to achieve economic goals. Specifically, the economic reforms encouraged non-exploitive small-scale entrepreneurship in cities and in the countryside. Incentive programs were instituted in the countryside and industry sectors of the economy that rewarded workers for greater or more efficient production. These reforms, coupled with an exponential increase in foreign investment, eventually led to the gradual privatization of some industry. For the first time in the history of the PRC the state was allowing the development of a bourgeois class, with more and more Chinese, especially urban Chinese, willing to *xia hai* (下海) or “throw themselves into the sea” of private business.⁴³

The possibility to get rich through private business or to make a higher income by working for a privately owned Chinese enterprise or joint venture corporation was not without its risks. Such employment opportunities provided the potential for greater earnings, but could not provide the social and job security provided by the “iron rice bowl” of the state owned work unit. Ironically, as more and more private companies and individual entrepreneurial ventures began to succeed, state owned enterprises were found deficient by comparison. Larger numbers of urban Chinese were finding their jobs in the traditional work unit to be more and more uncertain as an increasing number of state owned enterprises closed when no longer able to compete with private enterprises in the same industry.⁴⁴

Economic growth – coupled with changing attitudes toward capitalism, personal profit and entrepreneurship – provided the opportunity to accumulate both wealth and goods, evidenced by the emergence of a growing middle class in urban China. As a result, there was disposable income to spend, capital available to invest, and demand to be created. The market for cultural consumption grew out of capital investments in the work of professional culture makers (i.e. authors, artists, actors, musicians, etc.), and investments into the development of the myriad of cultural companies – *wenhua gongsi*, sprouting up all over China.⁴⁵ As the market became flooded with new goods to consume, it tapped into an emotion, the public expression of which was previously suppressed during the Maoist years – desire.

Technological Advances

When the economic reforms began in 1978, personal access to technology in China was extremely limited. Since that time, television ownership has increased from ten million sets to more than almost ninety times as many. Not only that, but access to satellite and cable television is at an all-time high, and talk radio, unheard of in Maoist China, is increasingly popular as a forum for public discourse. Personal communication in urban China today is as high-tech and rapid, if not more so, than in most cities in the United States. In the late 1980s there were roughly 50,000 mobile phones in China, compared with almost 10 million today. Computer literacy and usage is extremely high, and ownership of personal and home computers is rising. Nowhere, however, is the technological revolution in China more evident than in the use of the Internet. While many have been closed during various political crackdowns of the 1990s, Internet cafes are still one of the most popular venues for young urbanites to gather and to exchange information. Practically everyone you meet in China's cities has an email address. Microsoft China estimates that of the over 100 million users of Myspace® worldwide, 60 million of them are from mainland China,⁴⁶ and more and more people are turning to the Internet for their news and personal information gathering. Advances in urban mass transportation and highway infrastructure projects allow people and goods to travel more efficiently and quickly than

ever before. Personally-owned automobiles are increasing exponentially in number, attesting to the rise in the standard of living of the middle class, and adding to the increasing freedom of movement in and between China's urban centers (when not caught in the gridlock of urban traffic).

These technological advances, along with the many others, have increased the ability of Chinese people to have a freer exchange of information with each other and with the world, often at split second speed. In an age of increasing globalization, such technological advances help to expand the personal borders of the world (of information and people) within which the Chinese people live, while decreasing the distance (both practically and theoretically) between them and that world. Such instant contact and the massive exchange of ideas are at the heart of the emergence of urban pop culture, and fuel the fire of its continued development.

Influx of Foreign Influences

The isolation from which China was emerging in 1978 was a self-imposed isolation that had cut the PRC off almost completely from the Western world for nearly thirty years.⁴⁷ The influx of Western culture and technology that came with economic openness was an inevitable evil in the eyes of the central government, and was seen as the price of economic growth.⁴⁸ The Chinese people were bombarded with Western pop culture images that heralded such non-socialist values as individualism,

consumerism, and hedonism. Foreign influence has played a crucial role in capturing the imagination of the Chinese people and illuminating the possibilities of what Chinese urban pop culture could become. Such exposure began to generate a “cultural exuberance” of sorts among the Chinese people that exhibited itself through more and increasingly public displays of Western culture with Chinese characteristics. For an excellent example of this one need only look to advertising in China, especially the mass advertising of television and billboards. One can hardly help noticing the larger-than-life billboards of under-wear-clad young women in urban China’s shopping districts. At first, such ads depicted exclusively white foreign women, but increasingly, the models for these ads are voluptuous Chinese women.⁴⁹

Two other foreign influences that have contributed greatly to the emergence and development of urban pop culture in post Mao China are very Western in orientation – the importance of the individual, and the concept of “cool.” The needs, concerns and desires of the individual are a strong current in the discourse of urban pop culture, especially since the 1990s. The individual as consumer – of products, ideas, and culture – is now almost as common a part of the urban mindset in China as here in the U.S. The concept of cool is more ambiguous. It belies definition. It is an intangible quality that radiates individuality, innovation, newness, boldness, beauty or effortless. Its main quality is the ability to stir desire for it in the hearts of

those who witness it. The desire for “coolness,” to produce it and possess it, is one of the driving forces of urban pop culture.

The foreign influences that have flowed into China since the economic door was flung open in 1978 are too numerous to provide an exhaustive listing here. What is obvious, however, is that not only has China been influenced by Western culture, but it is also creating new forms of Chinese culture in light of foreign influences.

The shift in the locus of moral authority and social control in daily life away from the Party in post Mao China is apparent in the unabashed hunger among many Chinese for a personal share in the economic opportunities created by the market reforms. It is also apparent in the collective need of a formerly repressed public to explore greater opportunities for consumption, critical self-exploration, experimentation and personal expression. This is only possible because of greater freedom from state monitoring and control, due to the decline in the work unit’s influence on daily life. If all of this is coupled with rapid economic growth, the bombardment of China by foreign investment, culture, and values, and the sweeping technological changes of the last twenty years, then it is no surprise that urban popular culture is alive and thriving in China today.

Conclusion

During the Republican and post Mao eras, China moved from extremely closed cultural systems which emphasized the same-ness and oneness of all Chinese people and the other-ness of all non-Chinese, to cultural systems that were more open and where people began to explore the differences among Chinese people, some of the ways in which Chinese people can identify with other (non-Chinese) people around the world, and ways in which Chinese people could identify with each other – ways formerly considered entirely too taboo to acknowledge or consider openly. As Claire Huot states in her book, *China's New Cultural Scene*, “The forced homogenization of the Maoist era has been replaced. China is no longer one culture.”⁵⁰ That same sentiment rang true during the Republican era. As a result, China has witnessed two twentieth century shifts toward a more pluralistic society – a shift toward a society where the opportunity exists to choose between a variety of competing ideas and alternative ways of living and viewing the world. Both shifts have been accompanied by a growing sense of universalism that has encouraged Chinese to view China and themselves as part of, and in light of, the global community.

During the Republican and post Mao eras, culture makers tapped into urban China's desire to break free from the straight-jacketing of Confucian traditionalism and Maoist socialism, respectively. By breaking free individual Chinese had the opportunity to be the authors of their own stories and

contribute to the writing of the story of China, apart from the formal or official version of those stories. Urban popular culture created a forum where the expression of years of suppressed Chinese experience, dreams, ideas, and private thoughts may happen, if not in a free environment, at least in a freer one.

Notes

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- ¹ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W W Norton & Company, 1999), 267.
- ² WM. Theodore De Bary and Richard Lufrano, ed., *Sources of Chinese Tradition Volume Two: From 1600 Through the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 351 – 356.
- ³ Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 299 – 300.
- ⁴ China's plight was its exclusion from the table of international discourse (made painfully clear at the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919), and was in large part due to its relative weakness and inexperience on the global stage. Many Chinese elites recognized the resulting potential for a collective Chinese inferiority complex and exhorted their compatriots to work for a new, self-sufficient, and strong China.
- ⁵ Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 299.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ While whole chapters could be devoted to each of these factors, a brief overview of each is provided solely for the purpose of context. A full treatment of each or all of these factors falls outside the scope of this thesis.
- ⁸ De Bary and Lufrano, 351-365.
- ⁹ The five relationships – ruler to subject, father to son, husband to wife, male to female, and elder brother to younger brother, as well as the subordination of the needs and desires of the individual to those of society, were the anchors of Chinese thought and daily life.
- ¹⁰ De Bary and Lufrano, 352.
- ¹¹ Mark Borthwick, *Pacific Century: The Emergence of Modern Pacific Asia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 186.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ibid., 187.
- ¹⁴ Wakeman and Wei, 212.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 214.
- ¹⁶ Christopher A. Reed, *Gutenberg in Shanghai: Chinese Print Capitalism, 1876-1937* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), 9.
- ¹⁷ Borthwick, 187.
- ¹⁸ James E. Sheridan, *China in Disintegration* (New York: Free Press, 1975), 121.
- ¹⁹ Leo Oufan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 73-74.
- ²⁰ Yingjin Zhang, ed., *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai: 1922-1933* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 75-76.
- ²¹ Leo Oufan Lee, *Shanghai Modern*, 205-206.
- ²² Borthwick, 189.
- ²³ Leo Oufan Lee, *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 20.
- ²⁴ Sheridan, 124.
- ²⁵ Borthwick, 186.
- ²⁶ Shu-Mei Shih, *Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 85-86.
- ²⁷ Leo Oufan Lee, *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers*, 37.
- ²⁸ Yingjin Zhan, ed., *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai*, 101, 190.
- ²⁹ Shih, 4.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 12-14.
- ³¹ *The Tiananmen Papers*, ed. Andrew Nathan, Perry Link, and Orville Schell, from materials compiled by Zhang Liang (New York: Public Affairs, 2001), 46.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 48-50.

³⁴ Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 693. Similarly, students, in lieu of a work unit, were registered by household and school affiliation. Many rural Chinese were also registered with their respective work units, but the efficiency with which the system was maintained in the countryside could not compare to that achieved in urban China.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 717.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ For example, an offhand remark about the cloudy weather made in passing to a neighbor could be twisted into a veiled political slight on the Party. Or, a desire to improve your personal lot in life could be misconstrued as discontent with the life the Party had provided, and call your political loyalty into question.

³⁹ Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 618-620.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 655-661.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 618 -623. The Four Modernizations prioritized the national modernization of China to four key areas – industry, agriculture, science and technology, and national defense.

⁴³ James C. F. Wang, *Contemporary Chinese Politics: An Introduction, 7th Edition* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002), 324-326.

⁴⁴ Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 717.

⁴⁵ Claire Huot, *China's New Cultural Scene: A Handbook of Changes*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 60.

⁴⁶ Microsoft China's VP of Government Relations, Liu Fengming, gave this statistic in a talk to the KU CIBER group touring his company in Beijing in June 2006.

⁴⁷ Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 595, 605-608.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 662-663.

⁴⁹ Louisa Schein, "The Consumption of Color and the Politics of White Skin in Post-Mao China," *Social Text*, 41:146-147.

⁵⁰ Huot, 186.

Chapter 2

Identity Messages on Individuality

During the Republican and post Mao eras an incredible phenomenon emerged whereby many in the urban Chinese public abandoned the covered pot of homogeneous chicken broth Chinese culture in which they were floating (cooked up by Confucian traditionalism or Communist ideology) for the multi-flavored stew that is spontaneous urban popular culture. Out of the diverse fusion of ingredients in that stew, the predominant one during both eras was that of individualism.

China no longer looks or sounds like it did thirty years ago in the early stages of the post Mao era; the Chinese people look especially different. If the progression of individual identity and its expression could be tracked in post Mao urban China solely by the style of dress worn by people on the street, an observer would have seen the blurry images of a mass of nondescript blue and gray figures of the late 1970s and 1980s come slowly into sharper focus as many of those people began to dress more uniquely and individually during the 1990s. Today on the streets of urban China, an observer would see an ocean of colors, shapes, and styles. These small gestures of individuality are a microcosm of a greater exercise of individual identity and autonomy by more and more Chinese. In his book *Streetlife China*, Michael Dutton describes this phenomenon by declaring that the notion of the Chinese people continuing to be a “people-as-one” is a myth that

has been “blown wide open with a multiplicity of identities that have erupted across the urban Chinese landscape.”¹ Style and color of dress is but the outer evidence of a more deeply personal awakening, one that had also occurred in China during the Republican era when urban popular culture celebrated and perpetuated some of these very distinct identities as they were erupting across the urban landscape. It is as if Chinese urbanites during both of these periods finally began to admit what they really think and feel; no longer so afraid of the truth that it keeps them from acknowledging it. Sometimes the identity that a work of popular culture explores is not fictional, but is the actual identity of a notable Chinese culture maker.

At the most basic level, identity is the way in which one defines oneself, and may refer in a superficial or substantial way to what typifies or characterizes them. It is based on how one views, labels, or classifies those aspects of oneself to which one attributes importance – ones attitudes, values, talents, lifestyle, desires, pursuits, etc.

Prior to the Republican era, a person’s gender and class were the two primary determinants of their identity. According to Confucian tradition, a person was first a son or a daughter to his or her parents, and then they were a brother or sister to their siblings, honoring all who were their elders and ancestors. A person paid homage to their family’s patriarch, and to those for whom their family worked. If you were female, you also deferred to your male relatives until you were married to a suitable man who was chosen by

your family. After marriage, a woman deferred to her husband's family. Confucian codes of conduct and thought were the moral code for most Chinese, and questioning or going against that code set a person apart as a rebel; one who brought shame upon themselves and upon their family.

Although measured by a different set of criteria, those who lived through the Maoist era also had their identities determined for them almost from birth. The main determinants of identity during the Maoist era were class background and political purity. It was assumed that all Chinese were supporters of ongoing political revolution, and that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was the moral standard-bearer for all aspects of thought and behavior. To question the CCP was tantamount to questioning the revolution itself. Those who did so ran the risk of being branded as a counter-revolutionary and a traitor.

With the advent of the Republican and post Mao eras, the possibility that identity was anything other than what had been inherited from one's family or proscribed from above was a novel and captivating idea. Individual identity became a topic of conversation that readily moved into the sphere of urban public discourse, and culture makers from both eras tapped into urban China's desire to break free – either from the smothering confines of Confucian traditionalism, or the straight-jacketing of Maoist socialism – by placing experimentation and expression of individual identity as central themes in their works. For the purpose of this thesis, the concept of identity

will be comprised of one or a combination of the following definitions: “the essential character or aspect of a group or individual; the distinguishing character or personality of an individual or group; or the collective aspect of or set of characteristics by which a person is definitely recognizable or known.”²

Anyone who would have visited Beijing, and especially Shanghai, in the first few years of the Republican era would have seen cities full of contrast – between the traditions of Confucian Chinese culture and the wildly variegated experimentations of modern Chinese urban culture. A similar contrast has existed during the last thirty years of the post Mao era in urban China – where those who still hold to the ideals and the lifestyle once extolled by the socialist state stand in stark contrast to those people who are living a more consumer-driven and individual-oriented life. The messages, the general principles, about individualism most commonly extolled by the urban popular cultures of both the Republican and post Mao eras are the subject of this chapter. The specifics of these messages may vary from one era to the other, but the essential point of this chapter is the very fact that these similar messages are present in both eras.

Individualism is probably the most exotic and alien idea to hit the urban pop cultural stage in 20th Century China. For a people who had been conditioned to believe in the importance of the collective over the individual, a theory that advocates the freedom, rights, and independent thought and action of each human being must have seemed shocking and potentially

liberating all at the same time.³ Pop culture messages on individualism in both the Republican and post Mao eras extolled and exemplified the uniqueness of each person, and encouraged individuals to live lives of autonomy, expression, and experimentation. At the heart of all these messages was a celebration of individuality – the newfound freedom of independent thought and action, coupled with the equally new responsibility to determine one’s own personal moral standard, purpose, and direction in life. Leo Lee addresses this celebration of individuality during the Republican era in his book, *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers*. He states, “The acts of liberation from the past – exerting independence from parents and family, provided a liberation of sorts, but it was now up to the individual to determine his own fate. The discovery of self, therefore, became the first step toward the formation of a new identity.”⁴

Chen Duxiu, as one of the leaders of the New Culture Movement, viewed individuality as the intellectual basis of existence, and emphasized individuality and self-determination as the foundations of his philosophy. In his 1919 essay, “The True Meaning of Life,” Chen exhorts individual Chinese to consider the question, what is the ultimate purpose in life? He leads his readers to the point of drawing their own conclusions as they walk with him step by step through his explanation of the “meaning of life as understood by modern man”. Consider his key points:⁵

The civilization and happiness of society are created by individuals and should be enjoyed by individuals. Society is an

organization of individuals – there can be no society without individuals... The will and the happiness of the individual should be respected. Society is the collective life of individuals. To carry out one's will and to satisfy his desires (everything from food and sex to moral reputation is "desire") are the basic reasons for the individual's existence. People's happiness in life is the result of their own effort and is neither the gift of God nor a spontaneous natural product. Finally, the individual in society is comparable to the cell in the body. Its birth and death are transitory. New ones replace the old. This is as it should be and need not be feared at all.⁶

Chen not only holds individuality in the highest regard, but also highly values the connections that may be made between individuals. Basically, he makes a case that society is a reflection of the true state of the individuals within it. If individual people take seriously the responsibility for their own happiness, then they will be healthier and so will society as a result. Chen summarized his philosophy of what constitutes the ultimate purpose in life this way: "During his lifetime, an individual should devote his efforts to create happiness and to enjoy it, and also to keep it in store in society so that individuals of the future may also enjoy it, one generation doing the same for the next and so on unto infinity."⁷ The essay from which this quote comes was published in the journal, *New Youth*, and disseminated to an even wider audience through various other periodicals and newspapers of the day.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s of the post Mao era, an exceptionally influential Chinese culture maker promoted a similar type of individuality and personal responsibility through his work. Cui Jian, the Beijing rocker who has been labeled the "Chinese Bob Dylan", articulated

through several of the songs of his early career a need for personal courage and what he calls “guts” during the directionless and aimless nature of the post Mao period.⁸

To many of his fans he has not only been a critic of the political system, but he has also been even more of a symbol of rebellion against fame, materialism, and the non-political establishment.⁹ In the title track from his 1994 album, “Balls Under the Red Flag”, he laments the fact that so many individual Chinese have failed to take the opportunity to forge their own way in life and indirectly exhorts his listeners to each choose for himself his own set of values and then determine for himself the direction of their lives:

Suddenly the door opens
But actually not so sudden
The time has come
But who knows what to do?
The red flag’s still aflutter
But there’s no fixed direction
The revolution still continues
The old men have still more power.

Money flutters in the air
We have no ideals
Although the air is clear
We can’t see any further
Although our chance has come
We don’t have the guts for it
Our personalities are all rounded
Like balls under the red flag.¹⁰

Another post Mao era culture maker who clearly sees the value of self-determination and the need for individuals to establish for themselves a personal value system is the female author Mian Mian. The protagonist of

her popular (and banned-in-China) semi-autobiographical novel, *Candy*, is a young woman who says of herself: “I deteriorated into a ‘problem child.’ I quit trusting anything anyone told me. Aside from the food that I put into my mouth, there was nothing I believed in. I lost faith in everything. I was only sixteen, but my life was over. Fucking over.”¹¹ Through this powerful quote, she illustrates her protagonist’s disillusionment with life, the frustration she confronts as she attempts to determine for herself what she believes to be true, how utterly on-her-own she feels, and how these are the impetus for her hedonistic pursuits and self-indulgent lifestyle.

Another powerful identity message regarding individualism during both eras was that it was no longer taboo to engage in public discourse on private issues. Whether editorial or fictional, this type of discourse brought into the public view and public consciousness issues that had not previously been acknowledged or discussed so openly, and provided a forum where individuals could discuss social and personal problems.¹² In the Republican era, literature and printed media were the main vehicles of pop culture transmission. Magazines and newspapers sprung up overnight, and in 1915 Chen Duxiu began one of the most influential periodicals of the Republican era, *New Youth (Xin Qingnian)*.¹³ Within six months of the May Fourth Incident of 1919 over 400 new periodicals appeared on the urban cultural scene.¹⁴

One such periodical was *Life Weekly* (*Shenghuo Zhoukan*), published by prominent Shanghai publisher Zou Taofen. The most popular feature of the weekly magazine was reportedly the “Reader’s Mailbox” column. This column allowed individual readers to write in about their personal plights, thus exposing thousands of their fellow readers to their concerns and to the editor’s answers to them. *Life Weekly* created “a collective means of giving pluralistic voice to the largest audience China then had: the urban sojourning youth of Shanghai and other cities.”¹⁵ Though *Life Weekly* was one of the most widely circulated magazines of its type, literally hundreds of others took their cue from *Life*’s editors and offered columns in the same vein as the “Reader’s Mailbox.”

Periodicals also published editorials, fiction, and factual articles that highlighted the importance of the individual by publicly discussing the personal issues of that individual. Mao Zedong wrote one such factual article for a Changsha newspaper in 1919. The article was about a Miss Zhao, the daughter of a prominent Changsha family who committed suicide in order to escape an arranged marriage. Mao wrote that Miss Zhao died “because of the darkness of the social system, because of the negation of individual will, and because she was trapped in a cage made up of three iron nets – her family, the family of the intended groom, and Chinese society.”¹⁶ How ironic that the very “negation of individual will” that Mao condemned in 1919 was at

the heart of his political message throughout his reign as China's foremost autocrat.

A new genre of fiction that grew out of the publication of true stories of the type found in the "Reader's Mailbox" broke onto the Chinese literary scene during that same time. This new genre became known as "problem fiction". Generally the "problem" this type of fiction addressed was the patriarchal oppression of women, which then became the "problem" of a broader traditionalism that had tyrannized both men and women.¹⁷

In post Mao China several vehicles exist in urban popular culture for public discourse on individual matters. Literature, music, film, and television are the obvious mainstays, but the emergence of talk radio, access to the internet, and the proliferation of special interest magazines, newspapers and tabloids have increased, exponentially, the number of pop culture vehicles available and the number of people using and consuming them.

Radio personality, Xinran, in her book *The Good Women of China*, talks about hosting a radio call-in show from Nanjing called *Words on the Night Breeze* – one of the first of its kind on state-run radio. Readers would write to Xin Ran, many of them anonymously, asking for advice or simply telling their story to someone. She would read the letters on the air and listeners would call into the show to discuss the issues presented in the letters. She said she started the show:

To try to open a little window, a tiny hole, so that people could discuss personal issues in the media, though it was a

dangerous undertaking. It provided an anonymous way in which people's personal questions and concerns could be addressed publicly. Through this type of program, radio went from being one of many mouthpieces of the Party to becoming more of a mouthpiece of the people, exposing corruption and abuses of both an official and personal nature.¹⁸

Most often Xinran's writers spoke of women who were trapped in some type of abusive or exploitive relationship with a man, asking for advice on how to escape. One such writer was a young boy who told of an old, crippled man in his village who had recently bought a young wife. The young boy continued the story:

The girl looks very young – I think she must have been kidnapped. This happens a lot around here, but many of the girls escape later. The old man is afraid his wife will run off, so he has tied a thick iron chain around her. Her waist has been rubbed raw by the heavy chain – the blood has seeped through her clothes. I think it will kill her. Please save her.

“Whatever you do, don't mention this on the radio. If the villagers find out, they'll drive my family away.”¹⁹

Xinran enlisted the help of the local Public Security Bureau. After the initial disinclination of the police to interfere, they eventually found the girl, who was only twelve years old. Reluctantly, the head of the village's agricultural supplies depot was persuaded to threaten to cut off the entire village's supply of fertilizer if they didn't release her. The police reunited her with her family who had spent a small fortune searching for her. Though Xinran did not receive any accolades for helping the young girl, she saw this situation as a powerful illustration of what this new medium of discourse could

accomplish, and the power of individual moral conviction (that of the boy who wrote into her show) to help change the life of someone in need.²⁰

Radio was not the only forum for public discourse explored by the post Mao Chinese public. The advent of the Internet and the availability of personal computer usage have produced a large Chinese community of virtual communicators. Urban Chinese were getting the message, more than ever before, that opportunities for individual expression were available, possibly beneficial, and potentially profitable. Urban Chinese were also getting the message that depending on the means through which you express yourself, your personal views and confessions could potentially be available to an audience of millions with little or no cost. In 2006 Microsoft China estimated that of the over 200 million users of Myspace® worldwide, 60 million of them are from Mainland China.²¹ Personal web logs (blogs) have become the latest form of expression, dialogue, and even a confessional for Chinese urbanites, especially those of the most computer-savvy set – those under the age of thirty. Even one *China Daily* article touted the popularity of Internet expression with the title “Blogosphere – a new spiritual home for China’s youth”.²²

Online venues for individual expression and for the discussion of very private issues in an extremely public forum abound. The *Asian Sex Gazette* is but one example of several online news and question-and-answer forums on sex and sexuality. It has established its online niche with the lofty goal of

providing honest and informative reporting on sex in greater China, with millions of hits daily from Mainland Chinese. It offers everything from answers to common (and not so common) questions about sex to online reviews of sexual products and gay bars on the mainland.²³ Topics of the available news articles range from the sexual revolution empowering women in the metropolitan cities of China to the ills of the sex trade, prostitution, and human trafficking. If one subscribes to their service she will have access to a forum entitled “sex chat” where she may write in with questions about sex and sexuality, as well as with narratives of her personal sexual experiences. Others on the forum may respond online with advice or comments.

An example of someone who has taken it one step further by developing her own online sex blog is the female Chinese blogger Qin Dai. She uses her skin – specifically photos of her bare buttocks – on her blog to draw attention to the romantic novel she has written, which she is trying to sell. She explained that she has chosen to promote her book in this way because she has a strong sense of freedom and a deep desire to express herself “naturally.”²⁴

A third pop culture message on individualism that appears in both eras is that experimentation is a valuable pursuit to be undertaken in all areas of life, and that through experimentation one may understand one’s true self and may invent new modes of expression and experimentation. Even Lu Xun, philosopher and the purported “father of modern Chinese literature” is

credited with a quote apropos of this idea, “The first person who tasted a crab must also have tried a spider, but realized that it was not good to eat.”²⁵

Some of the farthest-reaching experiments began as a simple change of language on the part of one or more individuals.

Take, for example, the literary revolution of the New Culture Movement of the Republican era. Before that time all literature had been written in formal classical Chinese. In 1917 Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi sparked this literary revolution by calling for all Chinese authors to write what was “simple, direct, in the vernacular, and with a human sense of social responsibility.” They not only called for this change, but they exemplified it in their own writing, eventually making the use of the vernacular by a writer synonymous with “modern thinking”.²⁶

The vernacular, or *baihua*, became the main medium of communication at all levels of education by 1920, and its widespread use made literature and non-fiction writing more available to the general public. By the 1930s almost all writing was in some form of *baihua*.²⁷ This new type of writing also introduced hundreds of Western-derived vocabulary words into Chinese speech, such as feminism, utilitarianism, anarchism, and so on.²⁸

During the post Mao era, urban language has been forever changed by popular fiction writer, Wang Shuo, who took up the Western idea of using politics and political rhetoric as fodder for humorous and satirical expression; making it popular to distort past uses of official language. Here is a partial list

of some examples of his lexicon. If someone goes against their own will, they will be labeled as “reactionary” (*fandong*). Oaths between friends are sometimes taken on “President Mao’s head” (*xiang Mao Zhuxi baozheng*). Poker players are said to “study the number 54 document” (*wushisi hao wenjian*); a sardonic reference to a deck of playing cards. Those Chinese leaving the country are said to “join an overseas brigade” (*cha yang dui*). Anyone who retains their assigned state job while working at a second private job that pays more money follow the “one entity, two systems” (*yiren liangzhi*). When a male homosexual approaches another male he will ask if he is a “comrade” (*tongzhi*) to determine if he is also gay.²⁹ Adopting this form of speaking, and the cynical attitude it reflects has even been labeled as Wang Shuo-ism (Wang Shuo zhuyi).³⁰ Wang Shuo took a very big chance by experimenting with what had previously been considered hallowed language, but the Wang Shuo-ification of modern language in post Mao China continues, is constantly changing, and has inspired others to add to the new lexicon.

Not only did culture makers encourage the consumers of their works to experiment, but they also experimented themselves with new forms of expression. Lu Xun, as one of his contemporaries noted of him, “is often at the vanguard of creating new forms.”³¹ His story “The Diary of a Madman”, published in 1918, is considered the first “modern” Chinese short story ever published. Lu Xun had a fondness for anything new and experimental, and was considered an iconoclast for his valorization of the new.

Lu Xun's short story collection, *A Call to Arms*, in which "The Diary of a Madman" appears, ushered in the use of perspectivism in Chinese literature, and endorsed the use of both interior and exterior monologues in fiction, which quickly became a fashionable technique among Republican era writers. He also experimented with hyperbole and the use of various grotesque images in his writing. In "The Diary of a Madman" Lu Xun uses the idea of cannibalism to characterize the cruelty with which the Chinese people treated one another. The protagonist, the madman, sees cannibalism everywhere he looks and comes to believe that almost everyone he knows is planning to eat him and that his brother is in on the plan.

They want to eat me, and of course you can do nothing about it single-handed; but why must you join them? As man-eaters they are capable of anything. If they eat me, they can eat you as well; members of the same group can still eat each other. But if you will just change your ways, change right away, then everyone will have peace. Although this has been going on since time immemorial, today we could make a special effort to do what is right, and say this can't be done! I'm sure you can say that, Brother.³²

Lu Xun's prose poetry collection, *Wild Grass*, published in 1927, also contains several of his most grotesque images such as a corpse speaking from the grave and a man gnawing on his own heart. In this excerpt from the prose poem, "Revenge", he talks of how the body radiates warmth, and that people try to attract each other because they are "desperately eager to cuddle, kiss and embrace so as to enjoy the intoxicating ecstasy of life." Not terribly graphic... yet. He goes on to talk of two specific people:

This being so, the two of them, stripped naked and grasping sharp knives, confront each other in the vast wilderness.

The two of them will embrace, will kill each other...

From all sides passers-by hasten there, densely packed as tussores (silk worms) crawling up walls or ants carrying off salted fish-heads. They are smartly dressed but empty-handed. Yet from all sides they hasten there, and crane their necks desperately to feast their eyes on this embrace or slaughter. Already they have the foretaste of the sweat or blood on their own tongues when it is over.

However, the two of them confront each other in the vast wilderness, stripped naked and grasping sharp knives, neither embracing nor killing and, moreover, showing no intention of embracing or killing.

... The passers-by become bored. They feel boredom seeping into their pores, feel boredom from their hearts seeping out of their pores... Finally they look at one another blankly and gradually disperse, feeling so atrophied that they have even lost their interest in life.³³

One of the first group of culture makers in the post Mao era to take experimentation with new art forms to a new height was a group known as the Fifth Generation Filmmakers (*diwu dai*). They are the first class of filmmakers to graduate after the Cultural Revolution, in 1982. Claire Huot, author of *China's New Cultural Scene: A Handbook of Changes*, describes them this way:

This group of Chinese artists grew up step by step, stride by stride, with the People's Republic of China. They went through the different stages of life during the country's different socialist and post-socialist stages: infancy during farm reform and collective kindergartens; childhood during the anti-rightist movement and the first labor camps; preadolescence during famine, iron-smelting, and the rupture with the Soviets; adolescence during the Cultural Revolution; pre-adult days at the onset of reform; and finally adulthood during the current reform era.³⁴

The leading two representatives of this illustrious group are Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou. Their goal in filmmaking was not simply to reach a Chinese audience. They set out to make films that would be interesting to the world, often adapting the literary works of their contemporaries, called “roots-searching” (*xungen*) literature. Their films are examples of what is called “grabbism” (*nalai zhuyi*), a term used by Lu Xun, who employed this method in his writing by “picking things here and there, from the past as well as other cultures, where and when needed.” The Fifth Generation Filmmakers employed this method in their filmmaking.³⁵ These filmmakers are not unified by one style so much as by a commitment to “break new ground technically and thematically by exploring both their medium and their culture.”³⁶ The Fifth Generation Filmmakers’ literary peers were also experimenting in a similar vein, cultivating the so-called roots-searching school of literature.

One such marriage of literature and film is Zhang Yimou’s first film as a director. He adapted part of the book *Red Sorghum* by author, Mo Yan, for the 1988 film by the same name. Through this film Zhang Yimou showed his “blueprint” for making a film about China that could be successful domestically and internationally. He artfully combined different types of Chinese fetishes, while at the same time “combining the original meaning of fetish (that which is primitive from an outsider’s point of view) with its later meaning (as a transference of the sexual upon objects). His “blueprint” for

“Red Sorghum” is a combination of the Chinese countryside, Chinese old things, Chinese traditional arts and crafts, and attractive Chinese women.³⁷

It is a love story set in the late 1930s, about a young couple that meet when the young man is one of the bearers of the young woman’s wedding sedan. The woman is on her way to be married to a leper who owns an alcohol distillery. The narrator of the story is a present-day male who is telling the story of his grandparents. The first frames of the movie are a blank screen and the voice of the narrator: “I will tell you the story of my grandpa and grandma...” Then “Grandma” appears on screen, not as an elderly granny, but as a beautiful twenty-something woman who is played by the actress Gong Li. Even though she is wearing ancient fashion, she looks almost contemporary.³⁸

The two primary images recurring again and again throughout the movie are the color red the human body. Zhang convincingly reorients the color red from its Communist and revolutionary value toward its more traditional meanings – red as the color of celebration, the color of marriages, of life as birth, and even as the blood of death. The color red is the overtone for the entire film, from dyed red color of the alcohol red, to the red dress of the woman, to the reddening of a sunset sky. He also takes in the detail of the human body throughout the film: from the open mouth of the woman, her eyes, breasts, and red-shoed feet; the nape of the man’s neck, his back, shoulders, and strong legs; evoking all manner of fantasies, mostly sexual.

Some of the customs shown in the film are not Chinese at all, but are inventions of Zhang's own imagination. Even though these inventions read as foreign or "other to a Chinese audience, and are read as Chinese to an international audience, they still get the same basic story across.³⁹

The assortment of identity messages on individualism examined in this chapter is but a small portion of the myriad examples that exist in the popular cultures of both the Republican and post Mao eras. The method of transmission of the messages or the messages themselves may not be identical, but clearly they indicate that the urban popular cultures of the Republican and post Mao eras both celebrate similar principles: that individuality is important and worthy of expression; that it is permissible and possibly beneficial to discuss private issues in a public setting; that change and experimentation are inevitable; and that the individual is valuable apart from the collective. However, each of the examples clearly illustrates that while these similar identity messages were prevalent during both eras, they were not as prevalent or hardly expressed through the popular culture of the intervening Maoist era. In the next chapter pop culture identity messages regarding cosmopolitanism from both eras indicate a parallelism between Republican era urban pop culture and that of the post Mao era that is as evident as the parallelism illustrated in this chapter.

Notes

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- ¹ Michael Dutton, *Streetlife China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 239.
- ² *Merriam Webster's Online Dictionary*, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/identity> (accessed October 12, 2005)
- ³ *Merriam Webster's Online Dictionary*, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/individualism> (accessed October 12, 2005)
- ⁴ Lee, *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers*, 249.
- ⁵ De Bary and Lufrano, 366-367.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 367.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 368.
- ⁸ Huot, 162.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 169.
- ¹⁰ Jian Cui, online posting of English lyrics, "Balls Under the Red Flag," <http://www.cuijian.com/ENGLISH/Pages/works/works.html> (accessed August 26, 2006)
- ¹¹ Mian Mian Andrea Lingenfelter, trans, *Candy* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2003), 8.
- ¹² Borthwick, 187.
- ¹³ Jonathan D. Spence, *Gate of Heavenly Peace: The Chinese and Their Revolution, 1895-1980* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 143.
- ¹⁴ Sheridan, 121.
- ¹⁵ Wakeman and Yeh, 189.
- ¹⁶ Spence, *Gate of Heavenly Peace*, 169.
- ¹⁷ Shih, 204.
- ¹⁸ Xin Ran, *The Good Women of China: Hidden Voices*, tran. Esther Tyldesley (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 3.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 3-5.
- ²¹ This statistic was given by Microsoft China's VP of Government Relations, Liu Fengming, in a talk to the KU CIBER group touring his company in June, 2006.
- ²² "Blogosphere a new spiritual home for urban youths," *China Daily Online*, March 4, 2005. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-03/04/content_421879.htm (accessed October 12, 2005)
- ²³ *Asian Sex Gazette.com*, "China," <http://www.asiansexgazette.com/asg/china.htm> (accessed August 27, 2007)
- ²⁴ Echo Shan, "Bare butt of woman writer stirs readers up," *China Daily Online*, June 7, 2006. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2006-06/07/content_610704.htm (accessed August 27, 2007)
- ²⁵ Xin Ran, 3.
- ²⁶ Borthwick, 187.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ Sheridan, 124.
- ²⁹ Huot, 190.
- ³⁰ Qu Zhou, "Xiandai shichang jingji yujingzhong de wenxue beilun," *Yantai Daxue Xuebao* 15, no. 3 (2002): 303-307.
- ³¹ Shih, 85, 86.
- ³² Xun Lu, *A Call to Arms*, "Diary of a Madman," trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1981), 10.
- ³³ Xun Lu, *Wild Grass*, "Revenge" trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2000), 26-29.
- ³⁴ Huot, 91.

³⁵ Ibid., 92.

³⁶ Ibid., 93.

³⁷ Ibid., 100.

³⁸ *Red Sorghum*, VHS, directed by Zhang Yimou (New York: New Yorker Video, 1989).

³⁹ Ibid.

Chapter 3

Identity Messages on Cosmopolitanism

During both the Republican and post Mao eras China was a newcomer in one sense or another – as a fledgling nation it was a newcomer to the world stage in the Republican era, and as a formerly isolated country that threw its doors wide open to economic opportunity in the post Mao era it was a newcomer to the world market. As China and individual Chinese people entered into new territory and began to find their way, they were scrutinized by the culture makers of their day. The comparison of China with other nations in the global community was inevitable. Chinese culture makers were no longer able to simply compare China with its previous self in measuring progress, and began to compare China with other nations, and view the Chinese people in light of individuals from around the world. Though it had a long history and a rich cultural tradition, China was very new to the situation that it found itself facing during each era. As a young child trying to emulate its more experienced and savvy siblings, China as a fledgling nation (in the Republican era) and as an economic newcomer (in the post Mao era) saw its need to close the gap between itself and the rest of the nations of the world on several fronts, and no one expressed this better than the culture makers of each period.¹

Due to the inevitable comparisons of the Chinese with people from the rest of the world, cosmopolitanism became an idea around which many

culture makers in both eras rallied, often equating the term with modernism. At its most basic level, cosmopolitanism is the quality of being “so sophisticated as to be at home in all parts of the world or conversant with many spheres of interest. It can also refer to a person or place that “has the quality of being pertinent or common to the whole world; or having constituent elements from all over the world or from many different parts of the world or conversant with many spheres of interest.”² Since it is often used interchangeably with the word modern, it may also refer to the simple qualities of being and becoming current, of the present, and up-to-date or contemporary with other developed and developing nations in the global community. During both the Republican and post Mao eras China has shifted toward a more pluralistic society; a shift toward a society where the opportunity exists to choose between a variety of competing ideas and alternative ways of living and viewing the world. Cosmopolitanism and pluralism have been fiercely celebrated through pop culture identity messages during both eras as the following examples will show.

One of the first identity messages on cosmopolitanism common to the popular cultures of both eras was that for an individual to be truly cosmopolitan, he must see himself as a global citizen; someone who is world-wise and who views himself as a member of the global human community. Even Chinese sociologists today recognize that pop culture messages on individual identity are set increasingly in the context of the individual as a

global citizen, albeit one who happens to be Chinese.³ The same was also true during the Republican era.

Lu Xun is a prime example of one such global citizen, and of Republican era universalism in practice. His writing as well as his own life reflected his belief that each individual is a citizen of the whole world. In his writing he practiced the notion of “grabbism” (earlier referred to as *nalai zhuyi*), freely borrowing the best from Chinese culture and the cultures of other countries without the anxiety of cultural contamination or subjugation.⁴ His short story, “The True Story of Ah Q”, published in 1921, is the only piece of modern Chinese fiction to have received universal international acclaim right after its publication.⁵

As a student in Japan in the early years of the twentieth century he was exposed to Japanese and European writers whom he came to admire, and who influenced his writing. Some of his favorites were those he labeled the “Mara” poets. He credited these poets with the fearsome powers associated with the Buddhist god, Mara, the god of destruction and rebellion (Byron and Shelly were two of the “Mara” poets Lu Xun liked). He was outspoken in his reverence of the “Mara” poets, stating that they “were firmly determined to rebel, devoted their energy to action, and ran counter to the common disposition of their contemporaries.”⁶ Lu Xun embraced his identity as a global citizen and encouraged others to do so.

One post Mao era equivalent of the global citizen was the lead character of the popular Chinese television show “A Beijinger in New York” (*Beijingren Zai Nu Yue*). The show was first broadcast in 1993, and was a collaborative effort between famous post-Mao author, Wang Shuo, and his business partner and director of the series, Feng Xiaogang. The series is based on the book by the same name, authored by Cao Guilin. It is the story of a Chinese man, Wang Qiming (played by the very famous Chinese actor of “Red Sorghum” fame, Jiang Wen), who immigrates to New York City to live out his American dream. The show’s storyline is not a traditional Confucian morality tale, but has universal appeal. The lessons the characters learn and teach, respectively, could be portrayed as convincingly by characters of any ethnicity or nationality. Every character has their light and dark sides, and neither China nor the United States comes out as the “winner”. The city of New York itself even shows its heavenly and hellish sides. Wang Qiming, the protagonist, starts out as a hapless immigrant, ignorant of the ways of life in America. By the end of the series he is driving a Mercedes, has a private yacht, wears designer clothes, and has a mistress who has helped him attain his wealth. In the process of living his American dream, he has lost his wife to divorce, and his daughter is estranged from him. While not exactly the American dream he originally had in mind, Wang Qiming shows how one Chinese man lived beyond the borders of his own country and became a citizen of the world without changing his nationality.⁷

Another identity message from the pop culture of both eras that further explores the global citizen identity is the idea that an individual who is cosmopolitan and worldly would be able to recognize that he may share something in common with another person based on commonalities other than their ethnicity, nationality, or geographic location. This particular message is vividly illustrated through a piece of western literature, written in 1879 that spearheaded the championing of women's rights in Republican era China. It was Henrik Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House*. The protagonist, Nora Helmer, is thought to be a silly childish woman by her husband throughout her marriage, and though she is no such thing, she continues to act the part to maintain a harmonious relationship with her husband. She does this until she can no longer stand the thought of perpetuating the lie she is living. She leaves her unhappy marriage and even her children to forge a life for herself after realizing that she wants to live *her* life and not the life of the woman her husband thought she was.⁸

Just prior to the Republican era, in 1907, Lu Xun discussed *A Doll's House* in an essay he wrote from Japan, and taught the play in the early years of the Republican era to his students in Beijing and Shanghai (among whom was the female author, Ding Ling). His discussion of the play brought it to the attention of Chen Duxiu, the man who in 1915 founded the magazine *New Youth*. Chen Duxiu was also a champion of women's rights, and published a complete vernacular translation of Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House*, in

New Youth in 1918. As a result, the play experienced immediate popularity among urban Chinese and its protagonist became a media heroine who was heralded as a modern feminist. Her name, Nora, became synonymous with women everywhere who stood up for their rights, thus leading thousands of Chinese women to identify with a fictional Norwegian character from the end of the previous century.⁹

Popular culture in the post Mao era also contains several examples of universalism of this sort, where a media hero from another culture provides the voice for a large number of Chinese individuals who. For Chinese musicians and music fans, American rocker Kurt Cobain has been one such hero. As the former lead singer of the band Nirvana, he is considered the standard-bearer of sincerity and realism in rock music, praised for his free-spirited style, his cynicism, and his rejection of the rock institution and the trappings of stardom. The fact that Cobain would cross-dress in a very un-macho way for interviews and that the band would often destroy their instruments after each show “for pure fun so as not to have to do encores” was seen as evidence of his commitment to be true to himself and to not fall prey to the trappings and expectations of the rock “industry”. His suicide in 1994 is heralded by his admirers in China (and around the world) as the ultimate act of total commitment to his ideals.¹⁰

Pop culture maven, Sun Mengjin, is a Chinese rock fan and critic who has run an evening radio show since 1993 that airs twice a week courtesy of

The Shanghai Eastern Broadcasting Corporation, and his following is immense. He is a self-described “unrepentant fan of radical rock figures like Jim Morrison, Jimmy Hendrix, and Kurt Cobain.” He punctuates his on-air time with nihilistic phrases such as, “I don’t live well, that is my freedom” (wo huode bu yukuai, zhe shi wo de ziyou), and quotes from his own poetry, which speaks of life’s bleakness and the force and wonder of authentic rock. Sun often says, “Rock is life, stark-naked.”¹¹ Sun brought Beijing’s underground band, No (the name of the band is in English), to the attention of Chinese music fans as one of several Chinese bands who model themselves, at least philosophically, after Kurt Cobain and Nirvana. No’s lead singer, Zu Zhou, describes his band’s songs as being of the “no future” type of music: sadomasochistic, slasher, schizoid, scatological. The band members represent themselves mainly as dogs, and the imagery of their songs features such things as crawling creatures, unusual sexual couplings, and excrement, just to name a few. The titles of their songs leave no doubt as to their outlook on life: “Flies, ants, maggots and bottles, anus, alcohol” (*Canying, mayi, qu he pingzi, gangmen, jiu*); and “I am a snake in your flushing toilet” (*Wo shi ni choushui matongli de yitiao she*). Sun Mengjin, the rock DJ mentioned earlier, writes, “The No band’s music does not come out of China’s countryside, it comes from some graveyard, perhaps all of humanity’s graveyard.”¹² It is possible that in taking what they have from Kurt Cobain’s and Nirvana’s

nihilistic examples the No band has itself become a universal harbinger for postindustrial angst.

Multiple identity messages about cosmopolitanism from both eras have fused the label, cosmopolitan, with certain attitudes. While several vehicles of pop culture transmission relay messages about aligning oneself with and subscribing to modern attitudes about all aspects of life, nothing has relayed that message more than advertising. One cosmopolitan attitude that advertising promoted during both eras was that sexuality is not something to hide, but to be celebrated. The advertising maxim that “sex sells” was very apparent in Republican era ads. Paintings and photographs of modern, respectable women replaced the public image of the courtesan, although some of these images of “more respectable” women used by advertisers were at least as provocative as those that had been previously found in the courtesan journals.¹³ Notice the images of the 4 advertising posters below. Figures one and two show pretty, modern women who are fairly demure, and who are advertising a Chinese brand of cigarettes and cosmetics, respectively.

Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure three shows a more provocative pose in an advertisement for a pharmacy, and figure four shows a downright risqué pose in an advertisement for another pharmacy, where the model reveals her right breast.

Advertisements like these were very popular and prevalent in Republican era China.

During the Post Mao era not only have for-profit companies sought to sell their goods and services with provocative advertising, but government ministries have also jumped on the “sex sells” bandwagon. Even the Chinese Ministry of Culture, long considered a stronghold of hard-line party conservatives for years, had a very short stint on that bandwagon. It’s official publication, *China Culture Gazette* (CCG), had always been chock full of bombastic tirades of CCP propaganda, until 1993. That is the year the weekend edition of the CCG, called *Cultural Weekend*, totally changed its colors. Some say it changed from its usual revolutionary red tone to the yellow tone of soft-core pornography overnight. In the first issue of that year, *Cultural Weekend* printed a front-page interview with Chinese movie queen, Liu Xiaoqing, on the subject of nudity, and included many photos of seminude and nude women throughout the publication (Asian women as well as busty Westerners). It sold out in record time and word on the street was that *Cultural Weekend* had become “the coolest paper in Beijing.” The newly appointed editor of *Cultural Weekend*, who was the visionary behind the nudity publication, was a former Red Guard named Zhang Zuomin. He was

told to make the paper profitable, and even his hard-line chief editor stood behind him when the head of the Ministry of Culture wanted to discipline Zhang. The chief editor defended Zhang's actions and said he had successfully accomplished what no other editor of *Cultural Weekend* had done – turn a profit.¹⁴

Advertising has not been the only means of promoting the attitude that sexuality is to be celebrated. Mainstream literature also began to explore this otherwise taboo issue, as well as exploring greater social interaction between the sexes, and new sexual mores. In Ding Ling's 1928 story, *Miss Sophie's Diary*, we find a Republican era protagonist who allows us into her thoughts and feelings through the diary she keeps, and we are allowed to watch her wrestle with her own budding sexuality, among other things. While one of the prevailing themes of the book has to do with Sophie's self-pitying and fretful disappointment with life, the portions of the book dealing with sexuality, and female sexuality in particular, are very progressive for the period in which it was written. Sophie is a tubercular twenty-year-old woman living alone in Beijing, away from her family. She is the narrator of the story (which is told completely from her point of view through entries into her diary), and through that narrative brings up all manner of issues such as independence and autonomy from family, gender roles, dating, pre-marital cohabitation of men and women, sexual desire, lust, and love. Sophie no longer goes to school because of her illness, and she relies on her friends to help take care of her.

She has male friends and female friends who frequent the room she rents from a hostel while convalescing. One of her male friends, Wei, has fallen in love with her, but Sophie can't be bothered with his simpering overtures. She thinks he is a sweet but pathetically predictable and naïve. What does capture her attention is a tall young student from Singapore who is the friend of a friend. This is how she describes him after their first meeting:

The tall man's a real good looker. It's the first time I've ever been aware of male beauty – it's not something I'd ever noticed before. I always thought that there was nothing more to being a man than being able to talk, read people's expressions and be careful...

How can I describe the beauty of that stranger? Of course, his tall body, his delicate white face, his thin lips and his soft hair would all dazzle anyone, but there's also an elegance about him that I can't express in words or put my hands on, but sets my heart aflame. For example, when I asked him his name he handed me his card in an incredibly relaxed way. I looked up, and saw the corners of his soft, red, and deeply inset mouth. Could I tell anyone how I looked at those two delightful lips like a child longing for sweets?¹⁵

Sophie takes the initiative to seek out this young man so she can get to know him, often trying to put herself in his way so that he will notice her. She is the pursuer. Her interest is based solely on his good looks, though she hopes that his personality and his heart will excite her imagination as much as has his physical appearance. As she gets to know this young man, Ling Jishi, Sophie has to admit to herself that despite the fact that he bores her intellectually and has a personality that she finds distasteful, she is still enamored with the way he looks and lusts after him relentlessly.

No matter how dreadful his ideas are, there's no doubt that he drives my emotions wild. So why don't I admit I'm in love with him? I'm certain that if he were to hold me in a close embrace and let me kiss him all over then throw me into the sea or a fire I'd gladly shut my eyes to greet the death that would preserve my love forever. I have fallen in love with him; it'll be enough for me if he gives me a good death.¹⁶

In between bouts of longing for Ling Jishi and feeling disgusted with herself for such blatant lust, Sophie weaves through her narrative a tapestry of her everyday life and that of her fellow students in Beijing by casually mentioning things that would still be considered quite shocking to many people of that era, except the most progressive. She mentions how her friend, Yufang, is planning to move in with her boyfriend, Yunlin. She also mentions just as casually how Yufang and Yunlin don't want to get pregnant since they are not married and are still in school, and so they decide to live apart because they will be "safer" from a pregnancy standpoint. These issues, and so many of the other issues upon which *Miss Sophie's Diary* touches are ones that were not only new topics of open discussion in Chinese society, but were also the hot topics of Ding Ling's contemporaries who were students at the time or living on the fringe of student society in Beijing and Shanghai. Ding Ling's was one of the first Chinese female literary voices of the Republican era to successfully pioneer frank female exploration of sexuality in her work.

Lu Xun also weighed in on the subject of sexuality; specifically, what he saw as the one-sided view of chastity for women (when such chastity was

not demanded of men). In an essay he published in *New Youth* in 1918 entitled “My Views on Chastity” he responded to the tradition that required all women to maintain their chastity before marriage and after the death of their husbands, which was sacrosanct in Confucian culture.

In what way do unchaste women injure the country? It is only too clear today that ‘the country is faced with ruin.’ There is no end to the dastardly crimes committed, and war, banditry, famine, flood, and drought follow one after the other. But this is owing to the fact that we have no new morality or new science and all our thoughts and actions are out of date. That is why these benighted times resemble the old dark ages. Besides, all government, army academic, and business posts are filled by men, not by unchaste women. And it seems unlikely that the men in power have been so bewitched by such women as to lose all sense of right and wrong and plunge into dissipation.¹⁷

Lu Xun logically argued for a single moral standard regarding sexuality to be applied to all people, and for an end to the ignorant postulations that men were morally superior to women. He went on to advocate committing oneself to “see to it that all mankind knows legitimate happiness” over commitment to any tradition that tyrannizes and causes the meaningless suffering of another human being.¹⁸

In the post Mao era there are many examples in literature that openly explore individual sexuality and changing sexual mores. One of the first to do so, considered a watershed in the contemporary Chinese literary world, was the book *The Abandoned Capital (Feidu)*¹⁹, also referred to in English as *The Defunct Capital*, by respected Chinese writer Jia Pingwa, published in 1993. The book is a work of soft porn fiction; a roman a clef²⁰ that was said to be

“the most salacious Chinese sex story since the famous late-Ming *Jingpingmei*.” The book is a chronicle of the life and adventures of a lascivious and famous writer named Zhuang Zhidie. Zhuang lives in a provincial city that sadly tries to bask in the glory it once had as the former capital. While the story is mainly about Zhuang and how his fame in the literary world brings him attention that eventually leads to his fall from grace, the story is interspersed with generous helpings of sex. The sex depicted in the book is all the more titillating because of the attention the author drew to those passages that he evidently expunged from the text, presumably, because they were too explicit for print and would not make it past government censors. Jia Pingwa teases his readers with notes in the sex scenes that say such things as “Here the writer deleted 330 words.”²¹ Readers were supposed to take this to mean that the material that was removed from the text was even hotter than the censors (or possibly the readers) could handle.²² This brief excerpt from the book serves as a prime example of how this particular literary device of Jia’s worked:

Zhuang Zhidie’s mother, who shared the tiny flat, was asleep.

His wife quickly slipped out of her clothes.

“But you’re not wearing any underclothes, not even a bra!” exclaimed Zhuang Zhidie.

“All the easier for you to get on with the job,” she replied.

He pushed her into the imitation leather seat, lifted her legs up and apart, and set to work kissing her nether regions.

□□□□□□ (here the author has expunged 42 characters).

Her squirming only served to excite further Zhuang’s passion. His tongue and mouth worked busily.

Suddenly he felt an itch on his back. He had his wife scratch it for him.

“It’s a mosquito. What’s a mosquito doing inside in the middle of the day?” she wondered. She scratched away and then exclaimed,

“What do you think you’re biting? Whaaaatttt, whoaaaaa....”

She abandoned her scratching as her eyes stared heavenward, her body going quite stiff. Zhuang Zhidie felt a wave of warm liquid come streaming forth.

□□□□□□ (here the author has expunged 333 characters).

Zhuang stood up and looked at her with a smirk on his face. She asked,

“What’s it taste like?”

“You try it,” Zhuang responded as his mouth met hers. As he straightened up, he cried in pain and fell onto her body.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“My foot still hurts.”

“So you can’t really use all your strength.”

“I’m fine,” he responded, and with that he started up again.

“Let me do some of the work this time,” she said.

She stood up and let him sit down.

□□□□□□ (here the author has expunged 25 characters).

“Don’t cry out, the old woman will hear us.”

“I don’t care,” she said, and she cried out regardless. He stuffed a handkerchief into her mouth, which she bit on hard.

□□□□□□ (here the author has expunged 18 characters).

“Hurry up and get dressed,” Zhuang Zhidie said.²³

The further the reader works through Zhuang’s chronicle, the more women Zhuang works his way through sexually. As Geremie Barmé writes in his analysis of contemporary Chinese culture, *In the Red*, “The women that Zhuang works his way through during the unfolding tale are for the most part pathetic and fawning creatures, crudely depicted sex objects whose bodily

fluids act as the connective glue of the plot.”²⁴ *The Abandoned Capital* may have been post Mao China’s first sexually explicit novel published by a Chinese author, but it would not be the only one. Several more authors followed Jia Pingwa’s lead, many of whom have seen their work relegated to the *ditan wenxue* category of fiction – literature sold at sidewalk stalls and by street vendors. Several of those authors have been women; women of China’s new generation artists, who were born between 1970 and 1980. One such artist is Yin Lichuan.

Yin Lichuan is an outspoken writer, critic, and filmmaker. She graduated from Beijing University in 1996 with a degree in French, completed a graduate degree in filmmaking in France two years later, and then returned to China to work. She is a pioneer of a literary movement that started among Chinese poets in the late 1990s called “Lower Body” Literature (*xia ban shen wenxue*), thus named for its provocative style and explicit references to sex, crime, drug use, and violence. Yin and other writers of the Lower Body genre use sex as a metaphor – for independence and autonomy, equality, strength and power, etc. Sexuality in Lower Body writings is also used as a means for exploring and expressing individual identity. Some of her best known poems are “If You Ask Me This Was Rigged,” “Man Throwing Up,” and “Fucker.” In her poem “Why Can’t We Make It Feel Even Better?,” Yin talks about a woman who is having anonymous sex with a man she just met, and about the instructions she gives him to “make it feel even better.” Sex in this instance

could be viewed as a metaphor for power and for liberation – the woman in the poem “owns” her desires and is not afraid to ask for what she really wants, which is her own pleasure. Here is an English translation of the poem.

Hey, move it just a little higher, a little lower, to the left, no, to
the right
We’re not making love, we’re driving nails
Uh, a little faster, a little slower, a little tighter, no, more relaxed
We’re not making love, we’re sweeping out the smut, or maybe
lacing our boots
Hmm, a little deeper, a little shallower, a little harder if you
please
We’re not making love, we’re composing a poem, enjoying a
massage
We’re washing our hair, we’re bathing our feet

Why can’t we make it feel a little better, O make it feel a little
better
A little gentler, a little softer, a little more depraved
A tad more intellectual, more popular if you please
Why can’t we make it feel a little better?²⁵

The avant-garde style of Yin Lichuan and her contemporaries of the “Lower Body” genre created a massive controversy when they began to hit the Chinese literary scene in 1999. The “Lower Body” poets were both denounced and lauded by critics and the public, and the effect of their work and the distinctive voice with which they wrote was so recognizable that other authors were being lumped into this genre as they were praised or criticized for their similarity to “Lower Body” writings.²⁶

Three female authors who have been categorized as “Lower Body” writers each published novels in China within a four-year period from 1999 to

2002. Mian Mian's *Candy*, Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby*, and Chun Sue's *Beijing Doll* are semi-autobiographical novels filled with explicit descriptions of sexual encounters, casual couplings, drug use, violence, and a full range of characters from the underbelly of China's urban scene.²⁷ The authors narrate their stories from the perspective of their protagonists, whose voices are so starkly individualistic and detached that you can almost feel the loneliness emanating from the pages. It is not surprising that all three books were banned from sale in China. In the book *Beijing Doll*, author Chun Sue's protagonist is a fourteen year-old girl who narrates her life as a teenager in Beijing. When she speaks about her experiences in school and her classmates she does so with an emotional depth that is completely lacking when she speaks of her sexual experiences; those she speaks of with a dispassionate voice, in almost matter-of-fact terms. Her story alludes to a life that many in China may find hard to believe exists for someone so young. Here is an excerpt from the book where she describes one of her early sexual experiences (though not her first) at the age of fourteen, with the college-aged lead singer of a Beijing band:

The next day he invited me over to an apartment he'd rented at Tree Village, which people called Rock 'n' Roll Village. I didn't have anything better to do, so I went. We met at Beijing Normal, then rode our bikes way out to Tree Village together. He took me to his apartment in the western suburbs, really close to my stupid school. A foul-smelling river snaked its way through the area. He showed me his paintings, which were in several folios. One had nothing but green paintings. He called it "The Hell in My Dreams."

Going to bed with him seemed perfectly natural. Like the first time, with Li, I didn't even ask if he had a girlfriend. I hadn't made love in half a year at least, and he hurt me a lot; I screamed while he was on top of me. He just snickered. "You're not a virgin, are you?" he asked. That got to me.

"Neither are you, so what difference does it make? Your problem is you only took me to bed because you thought I was a virgin. You're too old-fashioned to be in rock 'n' roll."

I demanded that he get off. He smiled and told me not to be angry, that he was just teasing.²⁸

Figure 5

"Brunettes Are So Hot Right Now" – Shanghai, 2006



Mian Mian's novel, *Candy*, is probably the rawest of the three "Lower Body" novels mentioned earlier. It tells the story of a single young woman from Shanghai named Hong ("Red") who moves to Shenzhen to live life

independently from her family. She chronicles her experiences from the first time she has sex to her experiments with drugs, and her own eventual drug addiction that develops after moving in with her drug addict boyfriend. Her descriptions are plaintive, gritty, and straightforward with no hint at the romanticism associated with many young female writers. Here she describes the first time she has sex:

His full lips were on my breasts. He was the first man to kiss my breasts; he had made me this picture, given me this picture I loved. When I touched his hair, he quickly undid my clothes, and his tongue made my heart skip. He moved me, and I stroked his hair. His hair was so beautiful!

But when he pulled my body underneath him, I felt myself go suddenly cold. I wasn't even completely undressed, but in a moment he was inside me. It hurt a lot. Just like that, he had shoved his penis into my body. I lay motionless, the pain boring up into my heart, and I was mute with pain, unable to move.

He wasn't using his tongue on me anymore, and I felt let down. Except for the noise of his ever-quickening breathing, he didn't make a sound until it was over, and the whole thing seemed so ridiculous that I was overcome with sadness.

Finally he pressed his whole body against me for the first time and kissed me on the mouth. Until then, the bastard hadn't even kissed me on the mouth. And then he smiled at me, his full lips curving up, his eyes twinkling sweetly. In that moment, his face became once again the face I'd seen at the bar, a face that was nothing like the face he'd worn when he was fucking me.²⁹

Hong, *Candy's* protagonist, also maintains a very matter-of-fact attitude toward homosexuality and those struggling with their sexual orientation. The following passage illustrates this:

A couple of my girlfriends have been staying at my place temporarily. They're lovers. At one point I told them about

some meetings for lesbians, but they went only twice, and they never went back. They didn't think of themselves as lesbians.

A. was androgynous. She was bright-eyed and had a generous mouth. She was short statured (sic) and hunchbacked and walked duck-footed... A. was attracted only to women, and she had a powerful sex drive. Her most cherished dream was to get a sex-change operation. She felt that if she could only be a man from the inside out, life would be a little easier. A. came from a small town in Henan and had studied *pipa* – the Chinese lute – and classical piano. She couldn't stand the prejudiced way that people in her hometown had always looked at her, so she traveled to one of the open cities in the hopes of making her career there...

In any case, gay or straight, what did it matter as long as you could love someone? And I was thinking that even though A. and B. lived exhaustingly difficult lives, they were happy because they loved each other. They worked hard every day for that sex-change operation. They were sharing in the labor, and they would share the fruits of that labor as well.³⁰

After living through a roller coaster relationship with her boyfriend in Shenzhen, Hong moves back to her parents' home in Shanghai, disillusioned, depressed, apathetic, and miserable. Mian Mian vividly reveals Hong's hopelessness through multiple stints in rehab and thwarted suicide attempts. Here Hong talks about her second time entering drug rehab:

The second time my father brought me to the clinic, I was bald, one of my eyes was messed up, and I was so thin it was disgusting. I barely recognized myself. So who would have thought that when I approached the big locked door to the ward, one of the women would shout my name and cry out, "She's back! She's back! And this time she's lost all of her hair."³¹

The following excerpt appears in the book after Hong goes home from rehab the second time, and admits to herself that she no longer wants to live:

In the winter of my twenty-fifth year, a naked purity I hadn't been looking for came to me in a flash. There was nothing for me to do anymore but leave a pretty corpse.

One Monday morning, my elaborate plans for a 'natural gas incident' were foiled by my father's unexpected return. He knocked down the door, and the next thing I saw was a pool of my father's blood.

Once again there was an ambulance in front of our building. A medic ordered my father to hold up the oxygen bag with one hand while helping to support the stretcher with the other. The sound of the medics' voices as they criticized my father for moving too slowly stabbed at my ears, and the sight of my father's old and haggard face sent me into unconsciousness.³²

Throughout *Candy*, Mian Mian smacks her readers in the face with a cornucopia of jaw-dropping subjects for which she provides no easy answers – sexual promiscuity, drug use, violence, addiction, homosexuality, depression, suicide, etc. Hong's matter-of-fact narration throughout the novel, sprinkled with stream-of-consciousness thoughts by the protagonist almost makes the reader begin to believe that this person is just another girl trying to find herself, that all of her experiences are more commonplace in urban China than he originally thought, and that she could be his friend. That aspect of *Candy*, and of many other novels of the "Lower Body" genre, is what makes these novels so potentially powerful. They familiarize the reader with the problems and lifestyles of the protagonists, and the more often the reader finds this type of character in the stories he reads, the less extraordinary these characters sound and the more ordinary their lives become to him.

Non-fiction writing in China also illustrates changing sexual mores. In his collection of powerful personal narratives entitled *China Candid: The People on the People's Republic*, leading Chinese journalist Sang Ye illustrates changing attitudes toward sex in 1990s China through these excerpts from his interview with a female Chinese obstetrician-turned-sex-shop-manager who was educated in the States. She works in a privately owned sex shop. He calls her Dr. Sex:

She works in the Garden of Eden, Beijing. All of the employees wear white coats, like doctors in hospitals, including the part-time shop assistants. Many of them are out-of-towners with strong Hunan or Anhui country accents. They haven't had a chance to acquire the polite hypocrisy of city folk yet, and they ask all customers the same question: "Are you going to buy that?" They get paid according to how much they sell.

She was wearing a white coat as well, and leaning on the counter that featured blow-up girl dolls and massage paraphernalia. She had a long chat with the friend who had taken me there to make the initial introduction and then suddenly seemed to notice me.

"Anyway, this is where I've ended up. Our store is part of a chain. We have branches in lots of cities, though a few other outfits have been pirating our name. We've brought lawsuits against them.

"I'm just a shop assistant, really. What you see is what I do every day. I provide consulting services for the customers. Part of it is recommending the various products sold here, but I don't exaggerate their effectiveness. I certainly wouldn't advise anyone to buy China-made Indian Miracle Oil for instance, or God of War rings (which don't do a thing for you), or Superman condoms. If I did, then I'd be going against my medical code of ethics. What I will do is give advice about contraception to people having premarital sex, give out information on how to get an abortion, reassure people on issues such as whether masturbating to orgasm will affect your memory, suggest medicines suitable for older people, advise paraplegics on how they can make love, and so on. These are areas within the range of my professional competence. I help people attain

pleasure for its own sake and have more fulfilling sex lives. It's a philanthropic enterprise; and it's a job that brings me personal satisfaction. It also provides a lot of original material for my research. And it brings money. I need the money...

"Sex shops have existed in China for some years now. They started out selling sex aids and aphrodisiacs, though recently they've taken a more professional direction; so we have sex chain-stores like this one. For the moment, the authorities employ a policy of peaceful coexistence. They don't encourage us, but they don't stop us either. So long as we pay our taxes, they turn a blind eye to where the money comes from.

"Generally speaking, apart from underground porn, most of which is of very poor quality, there's nothing you can get in the West that you can't find in our shops, whether you're talking about sex aids or medicines. Among the items we can display openly are this Big Mouth inflatable woman and battery-operated vibrators and dildos, including this one with its G-spot and clitoral stimulators. The larger models are for vaginal insertion, and the narrower ones for the anus; they can twitch, vibrate, or wiggle. In America, you can only get some of these things by mail order or in out-of-the-way shops in red-light districts.

"When people say that freedom of the press and sexual liberation are safety valves for the release of antisocial energies, it seems to make sense, but it's not the whole story. Our nascent sexual awakening is just the first wave. The Chinese people are finally realizing their humanity, though not in the sense that's understood by the party or the state. If they can't accommodate what is happening, then the people themselves need to develop an awareness of human rights, and that may well begin with an awareness of the rights of women, as well as a heightened environmental consciousness, then concern about ethnic issues, and regional consciousness. All of these things will nudge the society as a whole towards a true awakening, and once that happens, there'll be no turning back."³³

Figure 6
Beijing Sex Shop, 2006



Another cosmopolitan convention promoted through pop culture identity messages from both eras is the ideal of the modern family. Alongside the essays of Chen DuXiu and other intellectuals attacking the Confucian tradition of the extended family structure (*da jiazu*), several popular periodicals of the Republican era also promoted the nuclear family (*xiao jiating*) – consisting of a married couple and their unmarried children – as the ideal, and even spoke in favor of a variety of patterns of cohabitation or free love. In the late 1920s *Life Weekly* (*Shenghuo Zhoukan*) projected this ideal through articles and advertising. *Life Weekly's* promotion of the ideal family also included an array of related changes, including more open social

interaction between men and women, the freedom to choose one's own marriage partner, the expectation that adult children would establish their own household with their new spouse once they married (breaking with the tradition of establishing their home within the household of the groom's parents), and complete autonomy of adult couples over their own property – providing for greater ease of property division in the event of divorce. Another change affecting marriage and the choice of one's partner promoted in the periodicals was an insistence that marriage be built upon mutual love and commitment rather than upon a business contract negotiated by two families. The notion that an individual (in this case two individuals) would need personal autonomy and space where he may make his own decisions and conduct his life in some semblance of privacy independent from his family, was a radical idea indeed.³⁴

Life Weekly (Shenghuo Zhoukan) presented an image of the family that was considered quite progressive at the time. This progressiveness was displayed most notably in their advice column. The column was filled with impassioned cries from readers who were experiencing their own clashes with traditional views and attitudes about love and marriage. Here is just one example: “My family is old-fashioned... My father intends to marry me off to the decadent son of a corrupt bureaucrat!... I have been very close to someone lately... Our love led to physical intimacy... and I am carrying the consequence of our love!... My father threatens to put me to death.” Most of

the letters conveyed an extreme urgency, such as a wedding that would take place within a week, some deadline imposed by the family patriarch, or a threat by the family to end financial support unless their expectations were met. *Life Weekly* regularly reported the suicides its young male and female readers committed because they were caught in various dilemmas in their struggle against traditional family values. Most readers, especially the most panicked and confused, treated the editor's opinions as guidance for action rather than as the editorial commentary they were.³⁵

Not only did periodicals and advertising lift up the nuclear family as the ideal, but they also painted a portrait of how the home of the nuclear family should look: a neat and immaculate place managed by a full-time housewife.³⁶ An entire imaginary ideal of urban modernity was constructed through the pages of many of the popular periodicals, especially those targeting women. Material culture was at the heart of this imaginary ideal, and it was particularly evident in advertising. Some of the more common modern products promoted through Republican era advertising were things such as Quaker Oats, Colgate Dental Cream, Momilk, and Fab detergent. Advertising helped to reconstruct a list of new luxuries and daily necessities for the modern urban household – electric cooking pots, cameras and Kodak film, gas burners, gramophones and records, fountain pens, etc., and reinforced the impression that all modern, cosmopolitan families possessed these items by showing photographs of a small nuclear family, with just one

father, one mother, and their unmarried children, using such items. The photographs also showed people who sported modern fashions and modern hairstyles while using their modern products in their modern home.³⁷ The message became “this is the desirable and attainable ideal – to be a modern family.”

Post Mao era China is not far different from Republican era China in endorsing the idea of the modern, urban family and lifestyle. The idea of the modern family in post Mao China still includes the Republican era version of the nuclear family (minus multiple offspring), but the idea has expanded to accommodate other contemporary variations. One such variation is the “open marriage” illustrated in this vignette from Annie Wang’s novel *The People’s Republic of Desire*:

For Beibei and her husband Hua, adultery is not a good word. They call their union an open marriage. Married with extramarital affairs is the most apt description of their lifestyle. Both Beibei and Hua belong to the growing group who claim that they are too lazy to get a divorce.

“What’s the point,” says Hua.

“Men are all the same,” claims Beibei echoing the familiar mantra of women with unfaithful husbands.

Beibei not only doesn’t believe in fidelity within marriage anymore; she is also among the rising population of white-collar young Chinese that embrace the idea of the one-night stand. Traditional Confucian moral values that the Chinese have clung to for thousands of years have simply lost their validity and make little sense in this world of instant gratification. If you see something you like, go for it. This is the new dogma.

According to a recent survey, 37 percent of all one-night stands take place between partners who meet on the Internet. Beibei doesn’t like the uncertainty of the information superhighway. She sticks with the traditional way, picking up guys or waiting for guys to pick her up in bars, at dance clubs,

or even on the street. This way she won't be surprised or disappointed on the initial meeting.

Beibei tells Lulu and me about her most recent rendezvous with men on the street. "It's so easy. Sometimes, I just wear some makeup and revealing clothes. As I walk on the street, men come to me and ask me if I'd be interested in being their girlfriend for a day or two. It's all upfront – there's no need to wonder if he will call you the next day."

Beibei is daring, but she also sets a rule for herself: no repetitions – one time and she's done. For her, the most embarrassing moment is to meet her playmate again in the same bar they first met. Normally, she pretends that she doesn't know the man and looks for new faces to talk to.

One night, Beibei brings Lulu and me to a place called The Bananas. As we order some cocktails, Beibei spots Luyi, her passionate fling from just yesterday. As usual, she ignores his existence. But Luyi walks toward her. Beibei starts to complain, "That guy that is walking toward us was with me last night. It looks like he wants to bother me again. Let's get out."³⁸

Another type of family model that is popular, especially among single, young, urbanites, is what I call the "friends as family" model. Television shows, film, and literature are peppered with young, single, urban adults living independently from their parents and in a more free-flowing communal arrangement with multiple friends. Many of their roommates come and go, but their "family" is usually organized around one or two close friends or a lover, who have displaced the role parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins used to fill as sounding board, community, confessor, and advisor. This family model runs counter to the that of traditionalists who, even after years of socialist propaganda, still believe that blood relatives are the most important influences in the life of an individual. Wei Hui's novel *Shanghai Baby*, and the film by the same name (presented at the Cannes Film Festival

in 2007), illustrate how this type of arrangement often becomes the most important support system some young urbanites have. This excerpt from the book is from the perspective of the book's main character, Coco, as she talks about her boyfriend, Tian Tian and why she lives with him:

He watched me in silence. His strange story grabbed me immediately, because I am drawn to tragedy and intrigue... Looking tenderly into his fragile, beautiful face, I understood the root of Tian Tian's sadness.

His eyes grew wet, and he clenched his hands tightly. "But I've found you and decided to put my faith in you," he said. "Don't stay with me just out of curiosity, but don't leave me straight-away."

I moved into Tian Tian's place, a big three-bedroom apartment on the western outskirts of the city. He had decorated the living room simply and comfortably, with a sectional fabric sofa from Ikea along one wall and a Strauss piano. Above the piano hung his self-portrait, in which his head looked as if he'd just surfaced from a pool.

To be honest, I didn't much like the area. Almost all of the roads were full of potholes and were lined on both sides with cramped, shabby houses, peeling billboards, and reeking piles of rubbish. Looking out of the window, I couldn't see a single green tree or smartly dressed person or a clear patch of sky. It was not a place where I was able to see the future.

Saturday. Clear weather. Pleasant indoor temperature. At exactly 8:30 A.M. I wake up, and beside me, Tian Tian opens his eyes. We look at each other for a second, then begin to kiss silently. Our early morning kisses are tender, affectionate, smooth as little fishes wriggling in water. This is the compulsory start to our day – and the sole channel of sexual expression between us.

Tian Tian just couldn't handle sex. I'm not sure if it was related to the tragedy that had caused his mental problems, but I remember the first time I held him in bed. When I discovered he was impotent, I was devastated, so much so that I didn't know if I could stay with him. Ever since college I had seen sex as a basic necessity (although I've since changed my mind about this).

He was kind, loving, and trusting as a dolphin. His temperament was what captured my wild heart. What he

couldn't give me – sharp cries or explosive pleasure, sexual pride or orgasm – lost significance.³⁹

Throughout the book various friends drift in and out of Coco and Tian Tian's apartment, some of them "crashing" for days or weeks at a time until they are ready to move on somewhere else. Coco and Tian Tian give their friends a place to stay, food to eat, marijuana to smoke, and shoulders to cry on about their problems. Instead of calling their families for help with the dilemmas they face, Tian Tian, Coco, and their friends look to each other for help in solving their various problems. Their story, however, is not the only one that illustrates this idea of friends as family. Mian Mian's book, *Candy*, also vividly illustrates this type of family model. *Candy's* female protagonist, Hong ("Red") lives with her boyfriend, Saining at various times throughout the book. At one point while they are living together, Saining's friend and fellow band member, Sanmao, moves in with them. Sanmao is married, but for some undisclosed reason is not living with his wife. He is also very committed to helping Saining and Hong kick their heroin habit, although he does not mention that to Saining or Hong as his reason for living with them. Later, when Hong decides to move out of Saining's apartment, she moves in with his friend, Sanmao until she can decide what to do. At a later time when Saining and Hong are living together they have invited two young female friends to live with them. These two women are a couple, and Hong talks

about how she and Saining are awakened one day by the couple's arguing and lovemaking:

The two people on the other side of the wall climaxed simultaneously, and then we heard them singing. Later it grew quiet again, and I began to feel anxious. It was as if I could see them as they faced each other, their eyes locked, and I realized that Saining felt as agitated as I did. It had already grown dark outside, and although the sight of a loving couple on Valentine's Day is usually comforting, we were nagged by embarrassment. It was Valentine's Day, and maybe all they wanted was to spend the day in bed. For me and Saining to hang out with them like this had to be the height of stupidity.

I said, 'Let's get dressed. Let's go somewhere a little more festive.

And Saining said, "Good idea! We gotta get out of here before they go at it again."⁴⁰

Consumer culture, especially advertising, plays a tremendously large role in promoting the imagined reality of modern urban living in post Mao era China. In the early years of post Mao economic reform, most of the television advertisements were for items that none of the television viewers would likely need, let alone be able to purchase. Advertisements in those early years were for things such as dump trucks, construction equipment, and industrial or manufacturing components.⁴¹ Eventually television and print advertisements began to promote more products that would be of interest and within the financial reach of the urban viewing audience. Most of the ads that show families are filled with the basic urban nuclear family – two adults and their one child – enjoying the benefits of whatever product they are marketing. Occasionally a grandparent slides into the scene.

In television and film, if the setting of the story is in a city, there are several items that are displayed inside the homes shown on screen as a matter of course, no matter how poor the family. Every home has a refrigerator and a television (most likely attached to a satellite dish), and almost every character, to a person, carries a personal cell phone (*shouji*). Other electronics such as digital video disc (DVD) players, high-end stereos, flat-screen and plasma televisions, personal computers, and washing machines are slowly being added to that list of daily necessities that ordinarily appear on screen. Advertising fuels the idea that a certain living environment, along with the right accoutrements, is the right and desire of all urban Chinese. Regardless of the item being advertised, most of the homes shown in television and print advertisements are ones that have been remodeled inside – having tile or hardwood floors, paneled or papered walls and ceilings, stylish light fixtures and furniture, clean windows filled with sunlight, and in some cases, even carpeted floors. One venture of the print ad genre that further elevates the “imagined ideal” of the modern, urban, lifestyle comes in the form of the weekend supplement to the popular magazine, *Lifestyle*. The supplement is entitled *Trading Up (pinwei)*. It calls itself “a magazine for the ‘new luxury’ set.” Like its parent publication, *Trading Up* is a basic buyers’ guide. The first issue featured reviews for brands such as Bvlgari, Gucci, Armani, and Tiffany. It shows Chinese of the so-called “new luxury set” alongside those of the new middle class, enjoying the products it advertises.⁴²

Consumer culture is not only celebrated through advertising. Rocker Wei Hua, formerly of the Breathing Band (*Hu Xi*), lauds her modern desires and the consumerist mentality in her solo album “Modernization” (*Xiandaihua*). In her song “Sunday” she celebrates the cosmopolitan lifestyle she leads by singing about her greatest pleasures – going to restaurants like Kentucky Fried Chicken and Pizza Hut, or staying at home without any makeup. In her song “Visa” – sung completely in English – Wei lists all the things she wants to do now that she has her Visa Card.

“I just wanna hang around with my honey in hand:
It’s OK, I just wanna learn to be cool,
walk the streets of Rome and L.A.
I just wanna buy a few things, coffee, cheese, books, clothes,
perfume.”⁴³

Wei Hua is not the only musician cashing in on extolling the virtues of a pleasure-driven culture. These lyrics from fiery female rocker Luo Qi’s (AKA Rose) song, “Pleasure Machine” (*Kuaile jiqi*) from the album of the same title say it all: “Let’s turn ourselves into pleasure machines: give me a night of carnival, I’ll give you a Valentine’s Day. Turn this lonely city into a pleasure machine.”⁴⁴ That is a far cry from the dreams of young Chinese adults just a decade earlier, who were hoping to go to college or find a good job above all else. Now it seems that pleasure for the sake of pleasure is not as shameful a goal as it once had been.

Figure 7

Elderly woman resting outside a Nanjing McDonalds. (D. Buckley 2006)



Another aspect of modern, urban life that has been celebrated through popular culture is leisure and entertainment. During the Republican era new urban spaces sprang up for cosmopolitan urbanites due to higher demands for leisure and entertainment. Cinema began to figure more prominently as a new component of the modern urban lifestyle, and renovation and construction of Chinese movie theaters began in the 1920s, peaking in the early 1930s. The introduction of film to Chinese urban culture resulted in mass exposure of the urban public to many things western, from fashion, to

music, to western social conventions. As a result, more Chinese began wearing western-style clothing and hairstyles. Western music and social dancing also became widely popular, spawning numerous cabarets and dance halls in the late 1920s and into the late 1930s. These new urban spaces brought a myriad of culture makers – entertainers, actors, musicians, cabaret artists, and professional dancers – onto the urban scene and into more intimate contact with the urban public than ever before. These urban spaces provided a place where people from several different genders, backgrounds, and classes could mingle together in a way that they had never been able to before.⁴⁵

A great example from Republican era literature that melds all of these components of cosmopolitan urban society together is Mu Shiyong's story "Five People in a Nightclub" (*Yezonghui li de wugeren*), published in 1932. "Five People" is considered a "synoptic" study of the city of Shanghai, where the city itself is the main character, and where all of the subsequent characters and scenes are used to convey different aspects of life in the city, especially its complexity. An excellent synopsis of the story, provided by Shi Shumei in her book, *Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Colonial China*, follows:

The story begins with a depiction of five people at five different places at one given time, Saturday afternoon, April 6, 1932. A tycoon who speculates in gold loses his entire fortune due to the plummeting of gold prices; a college student is broken-hearted; a socialite modern girl is reminded of her fading beauty by the malicious gossip of passersby; an intellectual

solemnly ponders the question of identity in his room; and a government clerk is suddenly fired from work... Mu uses the method of montage, juxtaposing seemingly irrelevant events occurring at the same time for a combined, associational effect.

The next section of the story entitled, "Saturday Night," has no characters and no plot, but is instead a long discourse on what a Saturday night in the city means. An overdose of images – ice cream, nightclubs, chicken a la king, café noir, jazz, kiss-proof lipstick, neon lights, whiskey, chocolates, and so on – are juxtaposed with newspaper headlines such as –

"Universal Benefit Realty accrued net annual interest totaling one-third of its capital investment – 100,000 taels"

"Did the northeastern provinces fall? No. The northeastern provincial militia is still fighting a last-ditch battle against the Japs"

"Countrymen quickly come join the Monthly Donation Society"

"*Continental News* already sold fifty thousand copies"

Mu Shiying then creates another fantastic vision of the cityscape in the next passage where with each cry from a newspaper boy of "Dawan Evening Paper!" the scene of the city around him changes.

The first time the newspaper boy cries out the name of the paper, the newspaper boy opens his blue mouth, inside which are blue teeth and a blue tongue. The neon high-heel shoe in front of him points its toe directly at his mouth. The second time the newspaper boy cries out the name of the paper, suddenly he has a red mouth again, from which his tongue sticks out. The enormous neon wine bottle in front of him spills wine into his mouth. Neon lights, the symbol of city nightlife, overwhelm the scene...

The next section, entitled "Five Happy People," depicts the five people encountering each other at the Empress Nightclub, all indulging in wild abandon. The perspective of the section mimics the circular motion of the revolving door of the nightclub, moving from person to person without premeditated order, while the section's language aptly captures the confusion of people in syncopated rhythm and disconnected images. The rhythm accelerates as time runs out for these people, and at the end we see the gold tycoon shooting himself in the head, and the other people standing around and gazing at his corpse in

silence. The last section then depicts the four people attending the tycoon's funeral procession."⁴⁶

The center of the action for most of Mu Shiyong's stories is the urban nightclub or dance hall. In his story "Shanghai Foxtrot" (*Shanghai hubuwu*), he paints a scene that projects the sensations of the movement, noise, and the smell of the laughing people and whirling dancers inside the nightclub in this way:

In the center of that smooth dancing floor are floating skirts and floating corners of jackets, delicate heels, heels, heels, heels, heels. Undisciplined hair and men's faces. Men's white shirt collars and women's smiling faces. Extended arms, jade earrings touching shoulders. Round tables are in an orderly row, but the chairs are disorderly. In dark corners stand waiters clad in white. The smell of alcohol, the smell of perfume, the smell of English ham, the smell of cigarettes...⁴⁷

Mu Shiyong's writing is but a sample of urban-centered writing from the Republican era. Many of his contemporaries such as Liu Na 'Ou, Wu Nonghua, and female writers such as Lu Yin and Ding Ling have also lent their talents toward painting the portrait of modern urban life in Republican era China.

In this aspect of modern urban lifestyle, the popular culture of post Mao era China very closely mirrors that of the Republican era. Since the mid to late 1980s urban in China has grown brighter with each addition of neon to the landscape; neon that advertises everything from karaoke bars to dance clubs. An old official slogan stated, "Eight hundred million people: eight hundred million soldiers." Now the slogan has been rendered as "One billion

people: eight hundred million are gambling; two hundred million are dancing.”⁴⁸ This saying may not be as popular today as it was even ten years ago, but it can still be heard occasionally on television and on the streets of urban China.

“Lower Body” writers tend to glamorize the urban venues their characters haunt, and paint a picture of China’s cities, swirling with movement, that is both beautiful and sad. Chun Sue’s character in *Beijing Doll* goes to places like the Jackie Bar and dance clubs called The Busy Bee to see bands named “Cold Blooded Animals,” “Underbabies,” and “The Fly.” She tromps all over Beijing with her friends, eating in fast food restaurants, checking out Internet cafes, and slurping Pepsi. Chun Sue’s counterpart in *Shanghai Baby*, Coco, dresses in miniskirts and has an active social life. She works by day as a waitress in the Green Stalk Café, and she frequents Shanghai’s dance clubs at night. Here is a taste of one of her nights out dancing at YY’s Bar:

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.

I saw my favorite DJ on the stand, Christopher Lee from Hong Kong. When he noticed I was there, he made a face at me. They were playing house and hip-hop, both totally cool, like a raging blind fire. The more you danced the happier and more unfettered you felt, until you were vaporized out of existence and your right and left ear lobes were both quaking – then you knew you’d reached your peak.

There were plenty of fair-haired foreigners, and lots of Chinese women, their tiny waistlines and silky black hair their selling points. They all had a sluttish, self-promoting expression on their faces, but in fact a good many of them worked for multinational companies. Most were college graduates from

good families; some had studied abroad and owned their own cars. They were the crème de la crème of Shanghai's eight million women, but when they were dancing they looked tarty. God knew what was going on in their minds.⁴⁹

Mian Mian's *Candy* also paints its share of glamorous and gritty scenes of urban life. Following is an excerpt of Hong, the main character, describing her evening out at a Shanghai dance club, DD's:

Whenever I went to DD's, I always sat in a high spot so I'd have a good view, and I watched the foreign men and the Shanghai girls, and there were also a lot of nice-looking Japanese exchange students. Everyone was pressed together and dancing. People who were tense about their jobs and people who were slackers all came here, and they all had empty, expressionless eyes, but the scent of semen was in the air. I rarely danced, since I had no feel for the music here. I liked underground music better – it could open up my body. The truth is that the Chinese acquire an underground sensibility while they're still in the womb, only nowadays everybody thinks they're white-collar workers.

Everywhere you look you see mirrors and red velvet. That night Kiwi sat with me the whole time, watching. There were too many people, the air was terrible, and Kiwi kept on fanning me with a fan.

When it was time to go home, Kiwi said, "Let's go to your place tonight!" We walked down the street, and Kiwi said, "This town is too silly. At any hour of the day you can find all kinds of people in the street just doing their thing." I said, "The Bund is nice, but there are so many homeless people hiding out there that it makes me feel funny."⁵⁰

In one of the grittier scenes from the book Hong talks about a prostitute she met in Guangdong Province named Little Shanghai. Little Shanghai was taken to Guangdong by her boyfriend and forced into prostitution. Hong attempts to paint for her readers a picture of Little Shanghai's world:

Every night we watched her riding the hotel elevator, up and down, up and down. There was an illegal gambling parlor in the hotel basement, and where there's gambling, there are prostitutes. It's a custom in Guangdong: when you're done gambling, win or lose, you call a prostitute. Otherwise it's bad luck. Little Shanghai in the elevator, a condom hidden in her underwear, kept a running tally in her head. Each john was equal to five hundred *yuan*. She had a good feel for numbers, but money left her cold, and after every trick she went back to the room she shared with her boyfriend-pimp (*laogong*) and turned the money over to him. She never saved any money.

That elevator was her world, and I remember it as the window on her life. She always wore a red short-sleeved wool sweater; she called it her uniform. She would stand in the corner of the elevator, right by the buttons, as if she were the elevator girl. Her eyes communicated an innocent desire. Fixing a man in the elevator with those black eyes, she might ask, "Do you want to do business?" Some of them wouldn't look at her, but some of them did, not that she cared much either way. Sometimes a man would come straight over to her and start feeling her up, squeezing her small, firm, breasts, reaching inside her pants... Every man who touched Little Shanghai in the elevator was hurried and anxious, and every man who looked at her had a rapacious gleam in his eyes. Little Shanghai always smiled at this, figuring that the men liked the way she looked as she leaned against the wall of the elevator and smiled.⁵¹

While authors of the "Lower Body" genre paint their own version of the cityscape of urban culture, no culture maker of the post Mao era has done more to illustrate urban life in China than Wang Shuo. Wang Shuo is a Beijing author who, through his writing, has tapped into the realities of life in contemporary urban China. He is a prolific author who has written over twenty novels, numerous television scripts, and several screenplays.

Considered the “father of the alternative literature movement” that began in the late 1980s and continues to the present, he gave voice to an entire group of people – the emergent class of disenfranchised urban dwellers who were pushed, or willingly chose to go, to the margins of Chinese urban society in the wake of economic reform. (These disenfranchised urbanites will be studied more closely in chapter four on sub cultures.) Most of his books, such as *Playing for Thrills* (*Wande jiu shi xintiao*) and *Please Don't Call Me Human* (*Qianwan bie ba wo dang ren*), are set in the underbelly of China's urban centers. They are populated by a cast of colorful characters – con artists, jobless drifters, underworld types and quick-witted smart-asses – all of whom qualify for the Chinese Communist Party's catch-all label of “hoodlum,” thus spawning a new literary genre known as *pizi wenxue* or “hoodlum literature.”⁵² The free-wheeling spirits he celebrates in his writing are lumped together in the same social category by virtue of their rejection of mainstream culture and mutual lack of involvement in any social or political causes.

Probably the most popular of his works is the television series he wrote called *Stories of and Editorial Board* (*Bianjibu de gushi*) which aired in 1991. *Stories* is a groundbreaking program in Chinese television because it is China's first sitcom. The twenty-five-part comedy series revolves around the staff members of a magazine of mediocre quality with the pompous name, *Guide to the World of Man* (*Renjian zhinan*). The show's basic recipe is this: “smart-asses giving out advice to others and more often than not bringing

trouble upon themselves or upon their clients.” Wang’s writing partner on the series, Feng Xiaogang, describes the sketches in each episode as “harmless fun, without any social critique that just touch on social things, without dealing with the system.” The show has a universal appeal because it talks about everyday city folk with everyday problems. The characters in the show spend most of their time acting as social counselors for one another and their clients – helping someone find a wife, settling family disputes, helping a fat man lose weight, etc. The strange solutions they devise to these problems keep the stories interesting, along with the hilarious verbal exchanges between the staff members. The funny cross-talks exploit gender and generational differences as well as differences in worldview and ideology. Most of the ideological differences occur between a very “red” older female staff member who still adheres to the ways of the Party and two younger male staff members who are of no particular ideological bent. Wang Shuo’s *Stories of an Editorial Board* appeal to such a large audience because of the ordinary, everyday flavor of the scenes of urban life it portrays. The novels of the “Lower Body” writers also appeal to a fairly large audience (though not as large an audience as that of *Stories*), because of the very shocking scenes of urban life they portray. Watchers of *Stories of an Editorial Board* identify with what they see in the show, so they know it is real, while readers of *Candy*, *Shanghai Baby*, and *Beijing Doll*, whether or not they can identify with what

they read, the fact that such a world exists in China's cities becomes more real to them the more they read this type of writing.⁵³

This chapter examined identity messages about cosmopolitanism most commonly seen through the urban popular cultures of the Republican and post Mao eras. It is not meant to be a comparison between Lu Xun and Wang Shuo, or Ding Ling and Mian Mian. It is, however, an examination of general principles, or messages, that various works of popular culture during both periods of China's history promoted about cosmopolitanism. The method of transmission of the messages or the messages themselves may not be identical, but clearly the urban popular cultures of the Republican and post Mao eras both celebrate the principles that it is important to be a global citizen, that part of being a global citizen means enlarging the context in which you live your life, and that it engenders the responsibility to tolerate several points of view other than your own – regardless of the issue. Now that the basic pop culture identity messages on individualism (from chapter two) and cosmopolitanism have been laid out, they will help provide a deeper context for Chapter four, which examines some of the more conspicuous identity types celebrated in the popular culture of both eras.

Notes

¹ Shih, 49.

² *Merriam Webster's Online Dictionary*, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cosmopolitanism> (accessed June 14, 2007)

³ Hong Ling Chen, "Linglei zhong de linglei renwu: 'Shanghai Baobe' zhong tian tian de xingxiang fenxi," *Shaoyang xueyuan xuebao (Shehui kexue ban)* 3, no. 1 (2004): 68-69.

⁴ Shih, 85-86.

⁵ Borthwick, 187.

⁶ Spence, *Gate of Heavenly Peace*, 102.

⁷ *Beijingren zai nü yue*, Television program, directed by Feng Xiaogang, 1993.

This series aired for the first time in 1993, and it was aired a second time right after I moved to Beijing in 1994. I, along with my Chinese neighbors, watched every episode of the show faithfully. At the time it was fascinating to see New York City from the perspective of a new immigrant from China and I thought that watching the show would be a good way to practice my Chinese listening skills. Because I was a fan of the show I had a ready topic of conversation no matter who I met. Practically everyone I knew in Beijing was hooked on this series.

⁸ Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999), 119 pages.

⁹ Spence, *Gate of Heavenly Peace*, 161.

¹⁰ Huot, 165.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹² *Ibid.*, 165-168.

¹³ Lee, *Shanghai Modern*, 73.

¹⁴ Jianying Jia, *China Pop: How Soap Operas, Tabloids, and Bestsellers Are Transforming a Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 105-106.

¹⁵ Ling Ding, *Miss Sophie's Diary*, tran. W. J.F. Jenner (Beijing: Chinese Literature, 1985), 20-22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

¹⁷ Spence, *Gate of Heavenly Peace*, 166-167.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Ping Wa Jia, *Fei Du* (Xia Gang: Tiandi tushu youxian gongsi, 1993), 536.

²⁰ A roman a clef is a novel that represents historical events and characters under the guise of fiction.

²¹ Jia, *Fei Du*, 17.

²² Geremie Barmé, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 81-182.

²³ Jia, *Fei Du*, 178-181.

²⁴ Barmé, *In the Red*, 182.

²⁵ Steve Bradbury, "Have Net, Will Travel: Is this the new face of Chinese poetry?" *Pots: The Voice of Generation Next*, October 20, 2005.

http://publish.pots.com.tw/english/Features/2005/10/20/382_17_Main (accessed August 27, 2007)

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Meng Tang, "Cong linghun xiang routi qingxie: Yi Wang Anyi, Chen Ran, Wei Hui daibiao lun sandai nu zuojia bixia de xing." *Xiandai wenxue zazhi* 2(2002): 18-20.

²⁸ Sue Chun, *Beijing Doll*, tran. Howard Goldblatt (New York: Riverhead Books, 2004), 76-77.

²⁹ Mian, 16-17.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 197-198.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 134.

³² *Ibid.*, 144-145.

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- ³³ Sang Ye, ed. Geremie Barmé, with Miriam Lang, *China Candid: The People On the People's Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 183-194.
- ³⁴ Wakeman and Yeh, 205-206.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 206-207.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 209.
- ³⁷ Lee, *Shanghai Modern*, 74-75, 105.
- ³⁸ Annie Wang, *The People's Republic of Desire* (New York: Harper, 2006), 375-376.
- ³⁹ Wei Hui Zhou, *Shanghai Baby*, tran. Bruce Humes (New York: Washington Square Press, 2002), 3-5.
- ⁴⁰ Mian, 87, 199.
- ⁴¹ During my first two years living in China (1988-1989) the television advertising was amateurish and pedestrian in the extreme, and rarely advertised daily-use products for the home or the individual consumer.
- ⁴² Jeremy Goldkorn and Joel Martinsen, "Virtual pin ups, literary nudes and a magazine with clout," *That's Beijing*, January 2006, 57.
- ⁴³ Huot, 178.
- ⁴⁴ Huot, 178.
- ⁴⁵ Zhang, *Cinema & Urban Culture in Shanghai*, 74-75, 100.
- ⁴⁶ Shih, 323-325.
- ⁴⁷ Shiyong Mu, "Shanghai de hubuwu," *Mu Shinying daibiao zuo*, ed. Wu Fuzhun, Zhou Ming, and Wang Zhijun (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 1998), 157.
- ⁴⁸ Guangming Wang, "You suo zuowei de shidai" (An era when we can do something), *Wenlunbao (Discussion)*, January 14, 1994.
- ⁴⁹ Zhou, 71-72.
- ⁵⁰ Mian, 174-175.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 105-107.
- ⁵² Edward Wong, "Best Sellers from Beijing: One of China's most popular writers comes to America," Asian Week Online, August 15, 1997. <http://asianweek.com/081597/arts.html> (accessed October 12, 2006)
- ⁵³ Huot, 51-56.

Chapter 4

Celebrated Identity Types

Ironically, pop culture makers from both the Republican and post Mao eras, while taking advantage of an urban climate that has allowed for greater plurality and individual expression, have often fallen prey to the need to define their characters to the point of rendering them somewhat common, at least on some basic level, amongst the other characters of pop culture works. Even in the midst of increasing plurality there is still conformity. When surveying a variety of the works from the pop culture of both eras there are certain identities or “types” that appear over and over with some frequency. These identities are based upon general categories of people mixing in the urban milieu of each time period. They all break the rules and test the limits of mainstream culture, but often in similar ways. The details about the other characters’ backgrounds and the specific setting may be all that differentiates them. Undoubtedly they are a superficial yet fairly accurate reflection of a generally recognized demographic, a type of person one would actually encounter in the urban China of each era – recognizable by their outward appearance (or “uniform”) and by their demeanor, attitudes, and personality as part of one of those general demographics. The ones featured in this chapter a sampling of some of the most notable identity types. Some are gender-specific, such as the “modern woman,” the “playgirl,” the “sexually promiscuous and confident woman,” the “modern female student,” the

“virtuous prostitute,” the “gold digger,” and the male literatus, or *wen ren*, to name a few. Those identity types featured in this chapter that are not specifically gendered are the “anti hero,” the “decadent social rebel,” the “tragic hero or heroine,” and the “cultural celebrity.” Each of these identity types may be represented in popular culture in a number of variations, but regardless of the variation, the theme of the basic stereotype still shines through.

One of the most pervasive identities celebrated in the urban popular culture of both eras has been the Modern Woman. The label of “modern woman,” became a catch-all for any female who did not fit the traditional mold of a woman of that period or possibly of the period just prior to the one in which she lived. The label not only included certain attitudes and character traits, but it also included a physical description that allowed one, at a glance, to identify that he was indeed dealing with a modern woman. During the Republican era there were three prevalent “uniforms” that a modern urban Chinese woman could adopt – the *qipao* or split skirt, the student, and the Western woman. The *qipao* as a “uniform” of the modern woman was devised by altering the robe of a Manchu banner man into a “split skirt” style of dress. The length of the sleeves, the length of the skirt, and the height of the slit were the main components of this new “uniform” that were altered to fit the individual wearer. Other features of this uniform could include high-heeled shoes, nude or flesh-colored stockings (preferably silk), shoulder-

length or shorter hair set in a permanent wave, and stark makeup that might include white face powder, thin, long, drawn-on eyebrows, and blood-colored lips. This “uniform” of the modern woman has also been called the “Chinese flapper” look. It was widely popularized through advertising and periodical images and celebrated as the height of style.¹

The “student uniform” is the style the author Ding Ling may have adopted when she audited classes taught by Lu Xun in the early 1920s. This style was anchored by the requisite long black skirt that fell well below the knee. The skirt was topped with a jacket, usually long-sleeved, in the style of a traditional scholar’s gown. It came to the hip, had a slit up each side, and was usually worn buttoned to the stand up collar of the neck (mandarin collar?). Any type of blouse may have been worn under the jacket, but was usually not revealed. Black or nude colored stockings worn with sensible shoes completed the outfit. The hair was most likely bobbed, also with a permanent wave, and very little make up was worn, except for a light dusting of white facial powder. The student “uniform” for the modern Chinese woman is also described in this quote from Leo Lee’s book, *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers*:

Her hair has been cut by half. To her loose short hair is fastened an ivory butterfly (ribbon). Her breasts inside her snow-white gauze shirt are very flat; obviously she is wearing a tight brassier... Under her short and open black silk skirt is a pair of short legs in white silk stockings. Further down are her daring high-heeled leather shoes, which make her limbs wave and writhe when she walks. The short hair and flat breasts were the typical features of independent, emancipated girl

rebels who were taken by the general public for “female revolutionaries” (*nu geming*) because the short hair was supposedly introduced from Soviet Russia. The outward appearance was very much a part of the Nora Culture (referring to the protagonist of Henrik Ibsen’s play, *A Doll’s House*).

As university students or teachers in secondary schools, they would, on their own initiative, daringly befriend and visit young literary men. Chinese literature of the 1920s was full of stories of how an independent Nora would meet and flirt with a pensive and pale young writer or painter.²

The Western woman “uniform” for the modern Chinese woman is best described in a short story by Republican era author Liu Na’Ou called “Games” (*Youxi*). In it Liu’s heroine is described as a “masculinized and athletic modern woman. She is slightly tan, with strong limbs, short bobbed hair, a ‘Greek’ nose, and a small cherry mouth. She wore sheer stockings, high heels, and usually a brightly colored one-piece dress in the fashion of American film idols such as Mary Pickford or Gloria Swanson.” Regardless of the specifics of the particular “uniform” of the modern, urban Chinese woman, she was usually described as “bold, direct, and unrestrained in her behavior.” If she wanted to smoke, she smoked. If she wanted to drink alcohol, she drank. By her clothing, her attitudes, and her behavior she marked herself as one who flaunts tradition and who makes a way for herself in the world.³ Other than her particular “uniform,” the mark of the modern girl is found in the independence and autonomy with which she exercises her own agency as she walks through life – especially with regard to her sexuality.⁴ More often

than not the “modern woman” of Republican era and post Mao era pop culture is very aware of her sexuality, knows how to use it to her advantage, or wants to explore it.

The modern female student as a celebrated identity type in the Republican era did not fit into a narrowly defined age group, as women of a variety of ages began to take advantage of new educational opportunities. However, the majority of those celebrated through works of popular culture did fit a generally recognized demographic – they were in their late teens and early twenties, they were hungry for knowledge, and they were eager to exert their independence. One of the most famous modern female students of that era is Ding Ling’s Miss Sophie. In this excerpt from the end of her diary, she allows us to glimpse her true feelings about the young man with whom she has been infatuated and the thought process that leads to her decision to leave Beijing for the South, where she plans to live out her final days:

Oh dear! What kind of words or emotions should I repent with? You, Ling Jishi, a man as contemptible as you, kissed me. And meekly and quietly I let you. But when that warm, moist soft thing was on my face what was my heart getting? I would never swoon like some women in the arms of their lovers. I was looking at him, *my eyes* wide open, thinking, "I've won! I've won!" It was because when he kissed me I knew the taste of what it was that bewitched me, and at the same time I despised myself. That's why I -suddenly felt miserable, pushed him away and started crying.

"...Why do you have to expose all your appalling side?" I really began to feel sorry for him again.

"Don't you get any wild ideas," I said. "I might be dead tomorrow."

Goodness only knows what impact my words had on him. He kissed me again but I evaded him, and his lips landed on my hand.

My mind was made up. My mind was clear enough for me to insist that he went. He looked rather disgruntled and wouldn't leave me alone. "Why are you being so stubborn?" I wondered. He didn't go till 12:30 a.m.

When he'd left I thought about what had just happened. I wanted to hit my heart hard, with all my strength. Why did I let a man I despise so much kiss me? I don't love him and I was jeering at him, but why did I let him embrace me?

Fortunately my life is mine alone in all the universe to play with. I've already wasted enough of it. It doesn't seem to be a matter of any importance that this experience has thrown me into the very depths of grief.

But I refuse to stay in Beijing, let alone go to the Western Hills. I've decided to take the train south to waste what's left of my life where nobody knows me, and as a result my wounded heart has perked up. I'm laughing wildly with self-pity.⁵

Sophie admits to herself (and to us through her diary) that she has persuaded herself to allow Ling Jishi to kiss her because of his good looks. Despite her slip in judgment, she still believes she knows what is best for her and how she wishes to spend her final days. She does not mention that she is going to consult with her family or her doctor about whether or not it would be good for her to leave Beijing. She makes the decision on her own.

To a modern female student of the post Mao era Sophie's indiscretion with Ling Jishi may seem hardly an indiscretion at all. Most of the students portrayed in post Mao era popular culture exhibit the independence of those celebrated in Republican era literature at a considerably younger age. While Ding Ling's Sophie considered herself blatantly modern for considering the

possibility of a romantic liaison with a gorgeous young man she'd met and with whom she had become infatuated, *Beijing Doll's* main character, Chun Sue, at the younger age of fourteen pursues relationships with older men and displays an almost blasé attitude toward her sexual encounters with them, some of whom she barely knows. In this excerpt from the book, Chun Sue speaks about meeting "G," the lead singer of a band she likes, and on particular night they spent together:

One night G and I sneaked into his room. My heart was racing. At first we logged onto the computer and got into a chat room, where we said things like, "How come everybody in here's a moron?" Then G played his guitar for awhile, until he looked over at me and said, "Let's take a bath."

"Bathe...to...gether?"

"Why not?" he said. We tiptoed into the bathroom. Standing back-to-back, we took off our clothes, but when we turned around, we didn't dare look at anything but each other's face. The water came in fits and starts. G told me that's how it always is in single-story buildings. After we'd washed up awhile he gently said, "I'll rub shower gel on you." Stirred by an excitement I'd never felt before, I turned and stared at his skinny, childish body, and we wrapped our arms around each other.

Back on his bed, we whispered as we looked through some comic books. I put on a Cure CD, just the right thing for a night filled with fantasies and texture – warm music, making everything just perfect. We lay back quietly and held hands. He gently kissed me on the eyes and on the lips.

"I,think... I think I want you..."

"Hm? What did you say?... Okay, sure," I said casually.

"I, I want you, you're mine, mine alone." He sounded very determined.

His alone? I'd never consider "belonging" to someone, not to anyone.

So, I told him how I felt about such things, sort of stammering as I did it. He sighed but didn't say anything. He just held me tight. By then it was already close to two in the morning. We set the alarm clock for 4:30 so that we could be out of there before G's folks woke up.⁶

It is hard to imagine Chun Sue, a fourteen-year-old middle school student in Beijing, as being more sexually experienced than a twenty-year-old university student in Shanghai, but this middle school student lived in post Mao era China, while the twenty-something university student lived in Republican era China. However, in their own ways, they are both examples of young women living outside the realm of what was generally considered to be respectable behavior. What concerns both of these students is not how society will judge their behavior or their attitudes, but what each young woman thinks of herself. That each relies on her own conscience as the standard by which she measures her behavior (and not society's collective conscience) is a telling measure of how independent each of them truly is.

Yet another identity type that frequently appears in the popular cultures of both eras is that of the playgirl. The playgirl is usually a sexually confident woman who may take many forms; she may be a femme fatale, a wanton and promiscuous woman, or even a "sexual feminist" who takes the initiative in the sexual pursuit. Mu Shiyong's heroine in his story "The Man Who is Treated as a Plaything" (*Bei dangzuo xiaoqianpin de nanzi*) embodies all three. Her name is Rongzi, and she is so sexually assured and aggressive that the protagonist, Alexy, is alternately afraid of her and attracted to her.

Alexy describes her by saying “she has a snake’s body, a cat’s head, a mixture of softness and danger,” and as having “a lying mouth and a pair of cheating eyes.” Despite the negative images his description conjures, Alexy also appears to admire Rongzi for her wit and her confidence. Rongzi pursues Alexy, seduces him, and makes him believe that he is her only lover. However, Alexy discovers he is but one of many lovers who help to satisfy Rongzi’s sexual appetite. Even when he knows she continues to lie to him, Alexy succumbs to Rongzi’s overtures because he is intoxicated with her body and the way she makes him feel. He allows her to use him as her sexual “plaything” until one day she simply disappears from his life. He is bewildered even though she had told him over and over that she is not a one man kind of woman, “Do you think a woman can be adored by only one man? Love is for the One, but I can have many playthings.” The most ironic aspect of the story is that this “dangerous and terrifying” woman turns out to be a university student by day who frequents night clubs and dance halls by night. In an odd way, Mu Shiyong’s character, Rongzi, is a Republican era example of a playgirl and a modern student.⁷

A variation on the sexually promiscuous modern woman in Republican era popular culture is the virtuous prostitute; the victim of social injustice who makes good. A real life example came out of the 1920s Chinese film, “A Woman in Shanghai.” The protagonist of the film is a young girl from the country who is sold into prostitution. The character was played by a young

woman by the name of Xuan Jingling who, herself, was a young prostitute in her teens at the time she acted in the film. She gained enough notoriety and earned money from her work on the movie that she was able to buy herself out of prostitution. She lived in Shanghai until she died in 1992 at the age of eighty-five.⁸

Post Mao era popular culture is rife with playgirls of all shapes, sizes, and persuasions. In *The People's Republic of Desire*, the narrator speaks of one of her friends, May May, a sexually aggressive young woman who sounds very similar to Mu Shiyong's terrifyingly tantalizing seductress, Rongzi:

China has been a conformist society for too long. Perhaps that explains why the new generations want to be different. They defy conformity by breaking the rules and testing the limits. But sometimes, they not only challenge the rules set by Chinese standards, but by Western standards as well.

May May is such a rule-breaker. She doesn't believe in the existence of limits. She has many hobbies, one of which is sleeping with middle-aged MBAs – men who are married but available.

She tells me about her theory in a hot-pot restaurant. "Young men are like grapes and middle-aged men are like wine. Their bellies may grow bigger, and the number of hairs on their heads may grow less, but they are more attractive; they make me feel intoxicated.

"Middle-aged men tend to be more generous in bed than younger men, who often don't want to control their desires. Middle-aged men tend to be more successful financially. They can buy you expensive gifts, whereas young boys can only send you flowers or a box of chocolates. Since middle-aged men have been around, and they have more status and more networks, they can help you with your career. They also understand women and know very well how to please us." May May speaks as if she is giving a lecture at a university.

I say, “Well, what you say might explain why you love middle-aged men, but it doesn’t explain why you always go out with the married ones.”

May May laughs. “Don’t you think that middle-aged MBAs are a more desirable group than those who are still single?”

May May continues with a smile. “Our parents’ generation is the generation of obedience. They have followed the rules and never enjoyed themselves. I like to live on the edge. I like to sleep with married men because the thrill of stealing makes the sex even more exciting! It’s so cool to do it in their own bedrooms during the day when their wives are at work.”

“In the same bed that they share with their wives? Not a motel or something? Don’t you think it’s an intrusion into the wives’ territory?” I can’t stop sounding a bit judgmental.

“That’s exactly the point. I am like an invader. Society encourages us to be competitive! I hate losing. It feels so good that these smart men are willing to betray their women and come to me. It’s called charm.”

“Do you think they like you because you’re so irresistible?” I ask.

“Well, I’m a modern liberal woman. I can give them the level of passion that their wives can’t. In return, I get the uninhibited, carnal sex that I want,” May May says proudly.⁹

May May, through her fascination with middle-aged MBAs and the ever-increasing notches on her lipstick case, displays the attitude of the huntress; she sees herself as a feminist and refers to the men she meets for one-night-stands as conquests. She is adamant that she does not want any emotional entanglements with these men and insists that her encounters remain strictly sexual. In many ways she seems to have adopted an approach to sex that is traditionally seen as male – unashamed of her desires, she sets out to get as

much enjoyment out of sex as she can without any responsibility or long-term commitment. She is not only an example of a playgirl, but also of a feminist. It is not enough for her to experience sex with as many men as possible. She wants to exercise her right to brag about it.

Another form of the playgirl that appears frequently in the popular culture of the post Mao era is the gold digger – a woman who openly looks for a rich man to keep her in the style to which she has grown accustomed. In another excerpt from *The People's Republic of Desire*, the main character encounters two young women, Ding Dong and Ah-Fei, who explain how they plan to capture wealthy husbands:

I ask Ding Dong, "What jobs do the two of you have that allow you to acquire such a nice collection of expensive cosmetics?"

"We're antique appraisers," she says proudly.

"Fashionable young women like you, why are you antique appraisers?" I humor them.

"In our business, we have a high-class clientele, either foreign, Taiwanese, or Hong Kong businessmen," Ding Dong smugly replies. "They're good candidates for spouses."

"So they give you these gifts for free?"

"Yes. If they want our honest comments on the antiques they have."

"Do you like the job?"

"It's a good way to meet men of quality." Ding Dong smiles.

"Are you guys *bang dakuan*, gold diggers?" I ask bluntly, waiting for their reaction.

"What's wrong with being a gold digger? All we want is a good husband." Ding Dong doesn't mind being called *bang dakuan*.

"What is considered a good husband?" I am curious what their definition is.

“A good husband should be tall and wealthy. He should come from overseas,” Ah-Fei cuts in.

“What do you mean by wealthy?” My fieldwork continues.

“If you talk about possessions, they have to have the three C’s: condo, car and credit card,” says Ding Dong.

“Four C’s are even better!” Ah-Fei cuts in again.

“What is the fourth C?”

“CEO!”

Her answer reminds me of the popular new rhyme: “First-class girls marry the Americans; second-class girls marry the Japanese; third-class girls marry the Taiwanese or Hong Kongers; fourth-class girls marry the mainlanders.

“How can you attract such wealthy men?” I ask.

“First, we study foreign languages...”

“Okay, then what else?”

Ding Dong continues, “We learn to cook Chinese food and some other Chinese tricks like playing the Chinese flute or doing calligraphy. Men, Chinese or foreign, like women who can be both domestic and cultural.”

“What about college education?”

“No. We don’t have any college education,” Ding Dong shakes her head.

“Do you admire the girls in Tsinghua then?”

“No way! We don’t want to become nerds with Coke-bottle glasses. Instead of studying calculus, our textbook is *How to Snare a Millionaire!*” Ding Dong says.¹⁰

As with May May in the first excerpt from the book, Ding Dong and Ah-Fei openly admit what they want above all else, and that they are willing to do whatever they must to get it. At one point in the conversation the main character asks them what they think of the young women who study at nearby Qinghua University. The two laugh derisively at the “eggheads” who pursue academic and career ambitions, as if those young women are cute, but naïve.

The gold digger is one identity type that is especially evident on the urban streets of post Mao China, not just on the page or on the screen.

Practically wherever one sees a wealthy gentleman, one will inevitably see a bevy of young beautiful women vying for his attention, regardless of the quality of his other charms. Because the generation who grew up as only children is reaching adulthood, the male to female ratio is tilted in favor of the females, and those who want financial security or a high-priced lifestyle have supplanted the doe-eyed, romance-inspired identity type of the pop culture works of the late 1970s and early 1980s as the protagonists and would-be heroines. Not all celebrated identity types of urban pop culture are the heroes of their own story.

Several identity types in pop culture are not as specifically gendered as those discussed above. One popular identity type with culture makers from both eras that falls into this category is the anti hero, especially after the success of Lu Xun's story about the ultimate anti hero in *The True Story of Ah Q* (1921). Ah Q is depicted as a selfish, cowardly, and cunning man who is capable of amazing self-deception. In the end he is shot for being a revolutionary even though he is not. He is only guilty of bragging about being one.¹¹ Lu Xun portrays Ah Q as a man who is not in touch with reality; one who lives in the fantasy world of his own mind and who finds a way to turn every insult and every blow to himself (physical and emotional) as proof that he belongs to a group, that he is surrounded by the community of all humanity who all suffer just as badly as he. His self-deception begins with his overly exalted opinion of himself. Though he is an illiterate day laborer who sleeps

like a homeless man in the Tutelary God's Temple, he finds endless ways to display the most patronizing and condescending attitude toward the people of his village.

Ah Q, again, had a very high opinion of himself. He looked down on all the inhabitants of Weizhuang, thinking even the two young "scholars" not worth a smile, though most young scholars were likely to pass the official examinations. Mr. Zhao and Mr. Qian were held in great respect by the villagers, for in addition to being rich they were both the fathers of young scholars. Ah Q alone showed them no exceptional deference, thinking to himself, "My sons may be much greater."¹²

Although Ah Q has seen revolutionaries decapitated and has concluded that any revolutionary rebellion would make life difficult for him, he begins to admire the way rumors of local revolutionary activity strike fear into the heart of one of the successful provincial candidates. As he begins to fantasize about being a revolutionary himself, and about how all of the people in his village of Weizhuang are his captives, he unwittingly begins to set the stage for his own demise by randomly shouting things such as, "Rebellion! Rebellion!"¹³ and idly talking about revolution in the abstract saying, "Revolt? It would be fine... A troop of revolutionaries would come, all in white helmets and white armor, with swords, steel maces, bombs, foreign guns, sharp-pointed double-edged knives, and spears with hooks. When they passed this temple they would call out 'Ah Q! Come along with us!' And then I would go with them..."¹⁴ Even when he is questioned at the yamen about his revolutionary activities he is all but unaware of the danger he is in, and all he

can do is express his indignation that the revolution that occurred in the village had taken place without him and that the revolutionaries had not let him join them. By the time he realizes he is being led away in a cart to have his head cut off his initial fright melts into calm as “It seemed to him that in this world probably it was the fate of everybody at some time to have his head cut off.”¹⁵ Then when he is being paraded around the public streets of the village as a public example, even though he does not realize it, the author fills in for us what he believed Ah Q’s thoughts about this would be “... that in this world probably it was the fate of everybody at some time to be made a public example of.”¹⁶ The last image of him with which we are left is his own shame... at his “lack of spirit” as he is being led to the execution ground. To make a show of his spirit he considers what opera would be most appropriate for him to sing. He only gets the first half of a famous line of opera out of his mouth as he shouts, “In twenty years I shall be another...,” leaving off the end of the line “stout young fellow,” which he does not know.¹⁷

The story was so popular and so universally received, that “Ah Q-ism” became a phrase that was added to the Chinese lexicon in the 1920s. It is a term that is still used today, and characterizes the Chinese tendency to ignore reality and rationalize any defeat as a “spiritual victory.”¹⁸ Lu Xun despised the Ah Q-like tendencies of the Chinese psyche, and set out, through his fictional characters, to illuminate for his readers the very real attitudes and actions he found particularly ugly among his fellow Chinese. He said, “My

method is to make the reader unable to tell who this character can be apart from himself so that he cannot back away to become a bystander but rather suspects that this is a portrait of himself as well as of all other Chinese.”

The post Mao era equivalent of the anti hero is deftly illustrated in Wang Shuo’s novella “Troublemakers” (*Wanzhu*), his first work to ever make it to film. The anti hero in this satire is not a specific character, but more ethereal. It includes anyone who displays a mindset the main characters find exceptionally ridiculous – for example, the ideologues of Chinese society who believe that their own ideology, whatever it is, is the only right one, and that they are better than those who do not subscribe to the same beliefs. The story is about three young entrepreneurs who concoct an entertaining way to make money. They act as surrogates for their clients – substituting their actual bodies and their own witty banter in place of their clients’ to achieve some otherwise unattainable goal on behalf of their client. The name of their company, the “Three Ts,” is a play on the Chinese word for substitute (*daiti de ti*), and refers to each of them as surrogates and to the three areas of service that they offer their clients: general troubleshooting; tedium relief; and taking the blame.

One of the company’s clients, a young pulp fiction writer named Zhi Qing, desperately wants to win a literary prize. So, the three entrepreneurs organize a mock awards ceremony for him. The event is a total mockery of the literary institution in China. The entrepreneurs arrange for phony writers

to read their “poems” to the audience. One such phony writer is a woman who is supposedly from the “Misty” school – an underground school of poetry known for its obscure complexity. She stands in front of the audience staring at them, then takes her long hair and places it on one side of her body, simultaneously reciting in an impassive voice, “People say this side of me is the Yangzi River.” She then proceeds to place her hair on the opposite side of her body, ending her performance with, “People also say this side of me is the Yellow River.” The crowd breaks into thunderous applause, and it is evident (especially in the film version) that the entire enterprise is one large spoof of all those things Chinese television unflaggingly shows – namely, people giving endless speeches and evening galas (*wanhui*) reminiscent of variety shows from 1970s American television. Once all of the phony speech-givers finish fawning over Zhi Qing (the client) and the absurd poems are all read to the audience, the scene morphs into a frenetic fashion show gone wrong. The stage is filled with people from all walks of life dancing to the beat of disco music that jumbles different historical periods and political climates together. – workers dancing with peasants and female bodybuilders, traffic policemen dancing with old-Shanghai prostitutes, Eighth Army and Kuomintang (KMT) soldiers dancing together, clowns and literati from Chinese opera dancing with students from the May Fourth (1919) era and red guards from the Cultural Revolution, and pretty fashion models dancing around a bride dressed in white.

The three main characters in “Troublemakers” are not pointing their fingers at anyone or trying to lay blame by any stretch of the imagination. Indeed, the attitude they project is summed up in their own words: “We can stand anything because we know there’s nothing perfect, everywhere is the same. We have no expectations, no recriminations,” and “If you don’t rely on anything, then you don’t care about anything.” Through the thoroughly dismissive attitude and ambivalence the main characters project, and the entertaining way in which they do so, “Troublemakers” makes it clear that the joke is on anyone who would try to convince them to believe other than they do, or those who believe passionately about anything at all. Those with an agenda, who rely on something or someone else for their strength or who expect something from life, are the ones who come off looking unrealistic and sad, not our main characters.¹⁹

The anti hero appears all over the landscape of Chinese popular culture, and is an effective device for pointing the laser of revelation at the types of people and attitudes the culture maker wants to lampoon by painting such characters in hyperbolic absurdity or by showing the contrasting characters in such a good light as to make those who display contrary ideas look ridiculous by comparison. Lu Xun and his post Mao era counterpart, Wang Shuo, are both masterful writers of the anti hero.

Another identity type featured in the popular cultures of both eras is the decadent social rebel whose hedonism and wanton pursuit of pleasure brings

his downfall or even early death. The decadent rebel was not only immortalized in fiction, but he was also evident in the lifestyle of some of the very culture makers who glorified him on the page. Celebrated author Yu Dafu, himself an icon of Republican era culture, was a writer who believed that all literature was basically autobiography, and most of his stories reflect that belief. He wrote favorably of the experience of premature death among decadent British writers, pointing to that as an emblem of their complete and utter rebellion against conventional morality and a civilization that had been built upon such notions. In 1923 Yu was quoted as saying, "Life is but the crystallization of sadness and bitterness. I do not believe that happiness exists. People accuse me of being a decadent, a hedonist, but they do not know the reasons behind my pursuit of wine and sex. Ah, waking up from deep drinking on a clear night, looking at the money-bought body sleeping near my chest, my melancholy and my laments are many times deeper and more painful than those of the self-appointed moralists."²⁰ His short story, "Sinking," is considered by scholars as the genesis of decadent literature in modern China. It is the story of a frustrated and lonely Chinese student living in Japan who attempts to relieve his frustration by engaging in nightly masturbation. Because the resultant relief he finds is fleeting, he ends up drowning himself at sea. Most literary critics of the time denounced Yu as immoral and as an advocate for "self-abuse." Only one critic, fellow writer Zhou Zuoren, who declared "Sinking" a "work of art" that contained nothing

immoral, though it could possibly be considered amoral. He continued his analysis: "It seems more correct to say that what is described in this collection, 'Sinking,' is the common agony of youth. The conflict between the will to live and reality is the source of all agony. Discontented with reality and yet unwilling to escape into emptiness, man can only continue to seek unattainable pleasure and happiness in this hard and cold reality. This is what makes the sorrow of modern man different from that of the romantic period."²¹ Yu Dafu's fiction attempted to lay bare those things of the private self that were traditionally repressed by most Chinese writers, such as anxiety, despair, guilt, sexual desire, insecurity, alienation, and paranoia. In a 1923 quote about his writing, Yu Dafu said, "My heart is thus inclined, to discharge myself once and for all of the sin of insincerity, I can only reveal my inner self in all its nakedness."²²

Gu Zongqi is one Chinese writer who embraced the same decadent style of Yu Dafu in his own writing. He and other writers like him who were influenced by Yu entertained the notion that death would be the ultimate relief from a painful and purposeless existence. In 1923 Gu was quoted as saying, "Now I can understand the meaning of the word death. Death is pleasurable, death is grand. Justice for the oppressed lies in the word death. When I die, I return this entirely un-free soul to its original state of freedom." Suicide attempts and "successes," preoccupations with death and suicide, and mental and nervous breakdowns marked the lives of such decadent writers. Gu

Zongqi fulfilled his ultimate “pleasure” by committing suicide at the age of twenty-six.²³

Post Mao era equivalents of the decadent social rebel abound in literature as well as in the real life exploits of some of China’s high profile culture makers. The author-turned-nightlife promoter, Mian Mian, straddles literature and real life through her semi-autobiographical book, *Candy*. The life of her protagonist, a young woman named Hong, is loosely based on Mian Mian herself. Both chose unconventional life paths, both moved between life in Shanghai and Shenzhen, both are writers, both have struggled with depression and have made failed suicide attempts, and both are recovering drug addicts. In her author’s note at the beginning of the book Mian Mian says, “This book represents some of the tears I couldn’t cry, some of the terror behind my smiling eyes. This book exists because one morning as the sun was coming up I told myself that I had to swallow up all of the fear and garbage around me, and once it was inside me I had to transform it all into candy. Because I know you will be able to love me for it.”²⁴ The people with whom Hong associates, the situations in which she finds herself, and the decisions she makes along the way illustrate the life of a young woman who lives in the moment and lives to excess. Perhaps through the words of her character Hong we may also see into the heart of the author herself as we consider these excerpts from *Candy*:

The next thing I knew, I’d been cut by Bailian’s knife. I didn’t see where he’d taken it from, I didn’t see the blade

coming at me, and I didn't see his hand returning it to wherever he kept it. All I remember seeing was him standing in front of me holding the knife, ashen faced, looking as if he'd pulled a muscle. The really interesting thing was that he wasn't even looking at me. He was staring out the window.

When he cut me, I went cold all over, and through the pain I was struck for an instant by the sensation that my body was separating from itself, and my spirits soared. Wave after wave of numbness hit me, spreading across my back, my mind went blank, and uncontrollable tears poured from my eyes. I started shaking, and I felt the same way I did when I read certain poems, or sang certain songs, or heard particular stories; but it was even more intense and came on more quickly.

Bailian was asking me, "Are you coming?"

He still wasn't looking at me.

"Where?" I said.

"Dancing."

"OK," I said, "Sure. But first let me go to the bathroom and wipe this blood off my arm."

I came back and stood in front of him, and when he raised his head to look at me, the knife in my hand went straight into his gut. After the blade went in, I didn't pull it out. My father had given me this knife. It was from Xinjiang. I don't know why my father had given it to me; it seemed just as strange to me as when he agreed to let me quit school. After all, he was an "intellectual."

Bailian stood in front of me without moving. We both just stood there, looking at each other. His expression puzzled me, but before that feeling could sink in, I realized that I could barely stand. Everything became silent and still, and I broke out in a sweat and felt myself drifting, drifting away.

The authorities showed up. Two knives, two people bleeding. I didn't know who had called the police, but they locked me up.²⁵

Hong, like Yu Dafu and the characters envisioned by the Republican era decadent writers, feels lonely and alienated from the rest of the world. She is

uninterested in the lives of other people, is wholly self-absorbed, and leads a hedonistic existence. She sheds some light on her inner life and that of her on-again off-again boyfriend, Saining, telling us about their fears, their dreams, and their modus operandi for living in Shenzhen:

Saining and I had a lot in common. For one thing, we each had our own worlds, our own mute worlds, and because of this, we respected each other's silences. We weren't interested in other people's lives, we were sensitive and self-doubting, we didn't believe what we read in the newspaper, we were afraid of failure, and yet the thought of resisting some temptation made us anxious. We wanted to be onstage, to be artists. We kept on spending other people's money, dreading the day when all of this would change. We didn't want to become good little members of society, nor did we know how. Anyway, we would tell ourselves, we're still young.²⁶

Hong vividly depicts just how the spiral into heroin began for Saining and eventually for herself. Her gateway drug was alcohol. She sinks into alcoholism while waiting for her boyfriend Saining to complete a drug rehab program, finding that she cannot function without drinking.²⁷ Despite his stint in rehab, Saining is unable to stay clean and continues to use heroin. He begins to use even more than he did before, and Hong's drinking continues to control her life. In a desperate attempt at salvaging their life together they both make a commitment to free themselves from drugs and alcohol. Having come out of the hypnotic haze of the alcohol, Hong is able to see her life and the problems she faces more clearly than ever:

If he was using heroin, it was barely discernible, and I wasn't drinking as much. Too often, though, we were in a state

of lethargy, and for the first time I found myself thinking seriously about death. I hoped that I would die naturally, in my sleep. I felt that I'd been fortunate, I'd enjoyed my life, and I hadn't really suffered very much. But lately I'd started to worry about money, and my desire for Saining was met with rejection, and with my boyfriend acting this way, over time I too lost interest in sex. Sometimes even bathing seemed like too much of an effort. I might as well have been dead.

Die in the prime of youth, and leave a beautiful corpse: what an intensely beautiful dream that was, but we couldn't manage to pull it off. We had neither energy nor passion nor love. We had nothing to burn except time... I didn't want to inflict myself on the world any longer.²⁸

Hong herself ends up desperate and in drug rehab in Shanghai after she gives into the pull of heroin. She knows that heroin was going to kill her, but could not resist it. As soon as she completed her first stint in rehab she flew back to the South and back to heroin. She said that, "Heroin had become as natural to me as breathing. What else was there for me to do except use smack? I couldn't be around normal people. They would never be able to understand the emptiness of using heroin or the terror that comes from quitting it. If I didn't have heroin, it didn't seem as if I could go on living."²⁹ Hong's hopelessness and eventual helplessness led her to self-destructive behavior, but not all decadent rebels self destruct. Some of them actually agonize over wanting to find a way out of their plight.

Rocker Cui Jian is another post Mao culture maker who represents a variation on the decadent rebel – the man who is morally directionless and not complacent with it. He articulates his sense of purposelessness through

the driving rock beat of many of his songs. The moral vacuum that he perceives in his own life and in the life of his countrymen gives way to this lack of purpose, so much so that even while opportunities abound in today's China (that previously had never been available), people are not sure which way to turn. Just two years before the release of the album "Balls Under the Red Flag" Cui Jian released another song from his album, "Resolution," entitled "Let Me Go Wild in the Snow." In it he sings of the complete and total numbness he feels (and believes the Chinese people feel), and the need for something to awaken his senses and his mind:

Stripped to the waist
I greet the blustering snow
Running down the road from the hospital I escaped
Don't stop me
I don't want any clothes either
Because my sickness is that I have no feeling.

Give me a bit of flesh
Give me a bit of blood
Take away my grit and resolve
Please let me cry
Please let me laugh
Please let me go wild on this snowy ground.

Yi Yeh Yi Yeh
Because my sickness is that I have no feeling
Yi Yeh Yi Yeh
Please let me go wild on this snowy ground.

I wear no clothes or shoes
Yet I cannot feel the force and intensity of the northwest wind
I don't know if I'm walking or running
Because my sickness is that I have no feeling.

Give me a little stimulation – oh doctor my lord!
Give me a little love – oh nurse my goddess!
Please let me cry or please let me laugh
Please let me go wild on this snowy ground.

Yi Yeh Yi Yeh
Because my sickness is that I have no feeling
Yi Yeh Yi Yeh
Please let me go wild on this snowy ground.³⁰

“Let Me Go Wild in the Snow” is not about momentary numbness, or numbness simply in response to a personal loss. Cui Jian calls it a sickness. He does not see it as something that could be changed overnight, but as something that needs to be cured, for him and for his fellow Chinese.

Despite the fact that almost seventy years separate the writings of Yu Dafu from Mian Mian and Cui Jian, and despite the fact that Yu is an educated literatus, Mian Mian is a high school dropout, and Cui Jian a rock star, the lives and works of all three are filled with the pursuit of pleasure, the preoccupation with death, or a sense of helpless wandering. One would think that such subjects would alienate readers, but it is that very subject, alienation, and the fact that all three explore it with such honesty and depth, that have made these two authors and the rock star wildly popular among their respective generations.

Another identity type that closely mirrors that of the decadent social rebel is the cultural celebrity – one who is notorious as for his or her personal

lifestyle as much as for his or her art. During the Republican era, more and more authors were able to make literature a commercially feasible vocation. The salacious “gossip literature” written by friends of these authors made them celebrities. Mu Shiyong was one such celebrity author. As one of the writers of the decadent school, he became known as an inveterate and “degenerate” urbanite, criticized for his lack of morals and the blatant way in which he flaunted his unconventional ideals through his writing and through his own life. He spent inordinate amounts of time cruising the dance halls and cabaret of Shanghai, had a prodigious appetite for women and alcohol, and was described as being foppish to the point of distraction. Opinions about him were as divergent as they were numerous. Qu Qiubai, as a representative of the League of Left-Wing Writers, is quoted as saying, “Mu Shiyong represents the perversion of the May Fourth intellectual ethic; he is a problem local to Shanghai’s capitalist environment, but dangerous in his ability to persuade Chinese readers throughout the nation to search for nothing nobler in life than material gratification.” He was assassinated at the age of twenty-eight, and like public opinion about him, his assassination is attributed to any number of reasons. Some claim that he was murdered by the Nationalist Party for being a traitor, while others purport that he was working as a double agent for the Nationalists and was mistakenly killed by them.³¹

While the example of post Mao cultural celebrity I offer here has not been the victim of a mysterious political plot, she has generated plenty of pop culture buzz all on her own. Back in 2003 a twenty-five year old sex columnist became an Internet celebrity when she posted an explicit online account of her tryst with a Chinese rock star. Her Internet site, Sina.com, began attracting over ten million visitors a day, and her name was the one most often typed into Sohu.com's internet search engine. The only other name that came close to hers in frequency was Ma Zedong.³² Her name is Mu Zimei. "I think my private life is very interesting," she says while arching an eyebrow and tapping a Marlboro Light into an ashtray.³³ She estimates she has slept with approximately seventy men, and she's still counting. She also reveals that she had no idea her online diary would draw so much notice, or that it would spark a national controversy. What she does do, however, is defend her right to sleep with as many men as she pleases – and to write about it. "If a man does this, she said, "it's no big deal. But as a woman doing so, I draw lots of criticism."³⁴ Mu Zimei is the pen name of Li Li, who began working in 2001 as a feature writer at *City Pictorial*, a glossy magazine covering fashion and social trends. At the end of 2002 editors overhauled the magazine and decided they wanted a sex columnist who could write about "real life" issues. Mu said she was chosen because editors knew she was familiar with the subject. Her first sexual experience – on April 30, 1999, she noted – ended with an abortion and left her wary of the opposite sex. She

followed that with a “pretty normal boyfriend” before concluding she was not a one-man woman. “Personally, I felt I was suitable for temporary relationships,” she said.³⁵ Her biweekly column in *City Pictorial* began in January. Her topics included recommendations on the best music for good lovemaking, the aphrodisiacal benefits of eating oysters and technical pointers on making love in a car. It was racy stuff for China, but hardly without precedent. What changed everything was her decision in April to start her own online blog at a new Chinese site for personal diaries. She thought it would be fun. While writing her magazine column, she had hopped from man to man, sometimes hopping to two men at once, sometimes hopping to married men. The topics she wrote about in her magazine column, though, remained more thematic than explicit. But in her online diary, she began writing explicitly about these encounters, or those of her friends, and on July 26 described her brief and apparently unsatisfying liaison outside a restaurant with a famous guitarist in a Guangzhou rock band.³⁶ In an effort to defuse the media frenzy, Mu quit her columnist job in early November and voluntarily shut down her website. She said she had other offers and hoped to continue writing, assuming the Government did not ban her writing altogether. She also said the attention had cramped her social life: she has been celibate for two weeks (at the time of the article’s interview with her).³⁷

Another cultural celebrity of the post Mao era is twenty-six-year-old “heartthrob novelist,” Han Han, who hit the literary scene as an eighteen-year-

old high school drop-out in 2000. He is wildly popular, considered a celebrity heartthrob who fills the teen girl fantasies of his largest fan base. He also has the number one rated blog on China's largest blog hosting site (Sina.com), is a professional racecar driver, and now he has been labeled as China's most popular "post-80s" author. He has written predominantly about life as a teenager in urban China, and it appears that his writing resonates with most of young China. However, he has been heavily criticized, even by his fans, for urging his fellow Chinese to "cool down" the flames of ultra-nationalism that have flared in the wake of post 9/11 global tensions. Han's urgings to "cool down" came after a nationwide call for a boycott of French supermarket chain, Carrefour, because one of its shareholders was a supporter of the Dalai Lama. In a question and answer session with Sina.com this statement was made by the interviewer, "We firmly boycott Carrefour but you tolerate the foreign power's insults against our great nation. If everyone was as weak as you, our country would have already been extinguished," to which Han Han replied, "You are valiant, brave, unafraid of death and a martyr...because you don't shop at a supermarket." Comments such as these fuel the criticism that follows him in the press, but it also fuels his celebrity. Part of the reason he is so famous is because he has simply been audacious enough to say what he thinks. Consider this statement made to Han later in the same interview, "During this divisive time you pretend to be clear-headed and speak calmly as a gentleman and patriot, yet speak out against public opinion. If

words such as yours are able to be published, apparently China is far too free. You should be banned.” A little incredulously Han replied, “Our people are on the one hand unleashing their political opinions, and on the other wishing the country be closed off? Our country is in the midst of progress and you force its degeneration. Be careful of what comes back around. Harm another and you harm yourself.” When told that many people think he is rebellious, he downplays his independence by saying “Actually, I’m not at all. I’m just doing what I like, and people happen to think of these things as rebellion. I’m not really rebellious.”³⁸

Probably the best-known and most influential Chinese cultural celebrity from post Mao era pop culture is author Wang Shuo. His prolific body of work from the 1980s paved the way for opportunities to write for television and film, often adapting his own novels to the small and large screens. He is the father of the “hoodlum” genre of literature (*pizi wenxue*), populated by characters who live on the fringe of society and who make their way through life on their own terms. The state labeled Wang Shuo and his circle of friends (who oddly resemble many of his novel’s characters) as “socially idle people” (*shehui xiansan ren yuan*). A journalist who interviewed Wang Shuo in the 1990s observed that:

Wang Shuo is lucky to be a member of the least restricted social group [in China]: the financially independent unemployed. They are not what is usually understood by the term *entrepreneur*; they have no grand ambitions as far as work or lifestyle goes; financially well-off, they can’t be induced by

material benefits or hurt by their withdrawal. In relative terms, their souls are un-tormented, and although they are careful not to break the law, they can do just about whatever they want.³⁹

By that description, Han Han has, in terms of his official status with the state, followed in the steps of Wang Shuo. Both are independent from the need for state sponsorship of their work and both at least give the illusion of being able to do whatever they want, since money is not a major concern.

If Wang Shuo and Han Han lived during the Republican era they would be considered members of the literati by virtue of the fact that they are published authors many times over and are both celebrities. The *wen ren* or “man of letters” is yet another identity type found in the popular cultures of both eras. By this description of what qualifies one as a “man of letters,” from a 1920s book on the subject, Mu Shiyong, Wang Shuo, and Han Han would all qualify. The initial qualification is that one be able to read and write a few words, “possess the conviction of his own genius, idiosyncrasy, physical beauty, experience in love, brazenness and flexibility against attack,” among other things. As far as temperament, the modern *wen ren* is a boastful man, more emotional than rational, amorous, and bohemian. He should have gourmet tastes, wear modern and fashionable clothes, and spend copious amounts of time and money cultivating several personal vices, some of which should be drinking, smoking, gambling, and womanizing. He should publish in order to make himself famous, and should write about his own life and

romances. Most importantly, he should not be afraid to take every opportunity to promote himself and his work.⁴⁰

Wang Shuo and Han Han personify real post Mao era *wen ren*. The literary embodiment of that identity is Jia Pingwa's protagonist, Zhuang Zhidie, in his book *The Abandoned Capital* (1993), mentioned in the previous chapter. Zhuang is a successful author who spends his time indulging his voracious sexual appetite by seducing as many women as he has time to bed. He drinks generous amounts of alcohol, and eventually loses his wife to divorce and loses his reputation as a serious writer to scandal.⁴¹ Though not all cultural celebrities are literary men, it seems that both eras celebrated such men on the page and in the news, giving those who enjoyed such celebrity a platform from which to garner more readers and spread their brand of art.

A final fashionable identity type from the popular culture of both eras is the tragic hero or heroine – the likeable character whose fate is a miserable one that he believes is inevitable and cannot be altered due to circumstances beyond his control. During the Republican era the idea of the tubercular scholar leaps most readily to mind, however, some of the most notable tragic figures were women, like Ding Ling's Miss Sophie. The tragic circumstances of the servant girl, Ming-feng, in Ba Jin's famous book, *Family* (1931), are a prime example of a young woman who is a pawn in the dealings of the family which she serves. Although Chueh-hui, one of the young masters of the family, has pledged his love to her, she has little hope that he will be able to

influence his family's decision to send her to become the concubine of an elderly man of their acquaintance:

Ming-feng's fate was irrevocably decided. But she couldn't give up the last shred of hope. She was fooling herself, really, for she knew there wasn't the slightest hope, and never could be.

She waited to see Chueh-hui that day with trembling heart. He came home after nine in the evening. She walked to his window. Hearing the voice of his brother, she hesitated, afraid to go in but unwilling to leave. If she gave up this last opportunity, whether she lived or died, she would never be able to see him again.

"Third Young Master," she called gently.

"Ming-feng, it's you?" Chueh-hui raised his head in surprise. He smiled at her. "What is it?"

"I have to speak to you." Her melancholy eyes avidly scanned his smiling face. Before she could go on, he interrupted.

"Is it because I haven't talked with you these last few days? You think I've been ignoring you?" He laughed tenderly. "No, you mustn't think that. You see how busy I am. I have to study and write, and I've other things to do too." Chueh-hui pointed at a pile of manuscripts and magazines. "I'm as busy as an ant. It will be better in a day or two. I'll have finished this work by then. I promise you. Only two more days."

"Two more days?" Ming-feng cried, disappointed. As if she hadn't understood, she asked again, "Two more days?"

"That's right," said Chueh-hui with a smile. "In two more days I'll be finished. Then we can talk. There's so much I want to tell you." He again bent over his writing.

"Third Young Master, don't you have any time now, even a little?" Ming-feng held back her tears with an effort.

"Can't you see I'm busy?" said Chueh-hui roughly, as if reproving her for persisting. But when he observed her stricken expression and the tears in her eyes, he immediately softened. Taking her hand he stood up and asked soothingly, "Has someone been picking on you? Don't feel badly."

He really wanted to put aside his work and take her into the garden and comfort her. "Be patient," he pleaded. "In another two days we'll have a long talk. I definitely will help you. I love you as much as ever. But please go now and let me finish my work. You'd better hurry. Second Young Master will be back in a minute."

Chueh-hui looked around to make sure that they were alone, then took her face in his hands and lightly kissed her lips. Smiling, he indicated with a gesture that she should leave quickly. He resumed his position at the desk, pen in hand, but his heart was pounding. It was the first time he had ever kissed her.

...Ming-feng seemed to awake from a dream and her expression changed. Her lips trembled, but she did not speak. She gazed at him longingly with the utmost tenderness, and her eyes suddenly shone with tears. "Third Young Master," she cried in an anguished voice.

Chueh-min came into the room. The first words out of his mouth were, "Wasn't that Ming-feng who just left here?"

"Yes." Chueh-hui continued writing. He did not look at his brother.

"That girl isn't the least bit like an ordinary bondmaid. She's intelligent, pure, pretty – she can even read a little. It's a shame that Yeh-yeh is giving her to that old reprobate for a concubine. It's a real shame!" sighed Chueh-min.

"What did you say?" Chueh-hui put down his pen. He was shocked.

"Don't you know? Ming-feng is getting married."

"She's getting married? Who said so? She's too young!"

"Yeh-yeh is giving her to that shameless old scoundrel Feng to be his concubine.... The wedding day is tomorrow. I certainly am sorry for Ming-feng. She's only seventeen."

"Tomorrow!" "Marry!" "Concubine!" "Old Feng!" The words lashed against Chueh-hui's brain till he thought it would shatter. He rushed out; he thought he heard a mournful wail... Suddenly a torturing realization dawned upon him. She had come to him just now in the utmost anguish, to beg for his help... And what had he done? Absolutely nothing.⁴²

Chueh-hui goes to search for Ming-feng but cannot find her. She had drowned herself in the lake in the garden, crying his name as she plunged to her death. The real tragedy of her situation is that she was unable to recognize her own worth and therefore did not want to be too troublesome to Chueh-hui by seeking him out again. In reality if Ming-feng would take the risk to “bother” Chueh-hui by telling him about her dilemma and asking for his help she would have found that he wanted to help her whether or not he was able to.

One equivalent that features prominently in post Mao era literature is not the tubercular scholar, but rather the drug-addicted artist. In *Shanghai Baby*, Coco’s boyfriend, Tian Tian, is a depressed artist who is sexually impotent and a heroin addict. In the end he comes to see himself as a burden to his girlfriend and the other people he loves. Strung out on heroin, he overdoses and dies in his sleep. Coco is left to ponder whether his overdose is accidental or intentional. The following excerpt from *Shanghai Baby* speaks of the last night of Tian Tian’s life:

I listened to the music as Tian Tian slipped into the toilet and, after a long while, wobbled out.

I knew what he was doing, but I could never deal with it head-on, deal with his dulled, vacuous expression, as if his soul had flown far far away. Afterward, I got drunk. His drug high required a matching alcoholic high on my part, and with each of us inside our own high, we resisted our egos, ignored our pain, and jumped about like rays of light.

Having danced inside the music and soared inside our own euphoria, at one in the morning we returned to our apartment. We didn't wash, just threw off our clothes and lay down on the bed. The air conditioning was on full blast, and even in my dreams I could hear its buzz, like an insect's cry. My dreams were empty except for that one troubling sound.

Early the next morning, as soon as the first ray of sunlight showed, I opened my eyes and turned to kiss Tian Tian. My hot, hot kiss was imprinted on his cold, cold body, which was glowing white. I shook him hard, called him, kissed him, and pulled his hair. Then, I jumped out of bed naked and ran onto the balcony. Through the glass I stared at the bed inside the room, at my lover's body lying there. I stared for a long, long time. Tears flooded my face, and I bit my fingertips. I cried out: "You fool!" He didn't react. He was dead and so was I.⁴³

The tragedy of Tian Tian is repeated over and over through the works of Mian Mian, Jia Pingwa, Wang Shuo, and countless other culture makers of the post Mao era. It seems that the opportunities afforded urban Chinese in this era also afforded more means of rendering its pop culture characters tragic. These tragic characters, whether male or female, educated or not, found sympathetic readers in their respective eras. Although they are not always the protagonists of their stories, they are hard to forget.

The identity types presented in this chapter represent some of the most vivid ones celebrated in the popular culture of the Republican and post Mao eras. The femme fatale, the playgirl, the decadent social rebel, the anti hero, the cultural celebrity, and the tragic hero or heroine all appear frequently in the pop culture works of both eras. It is ironic that in the midst of celebrating individuality and plurality pop culture makers from both eras

inadvertently (or maybe intentionally) reinforce the notion of conformity. In celebrating their individuality, pop culture makers force the characters they create into an identifiable group or demographic. Maybe the journey from being part of a conformist collective, through the celebration of one's unique individuality leads to a place where one understands what she values and desires, and as a result, is better-equipped to connect with others of similar values and desires. Perhaps plurality and individuality lead to even more meaningful community based on real commonalities and not simply ideological ones.

Notes

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- ¹ Lee, *Romantic Generation*, 33.
- ² *Ibid.*, 33-34.
- ³ Lee, *Shanghai Modern*, 194-198.
- ⁴ James Farrer, *Opening Up: Youth Sex Culture and Market Reform in Shanghai* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 42-47.
- ⁵ Ding, 61-64.
- ⁶ Zhou, 121, 127-130.
- ⁷ Shiyong Mu, "Bei dangzuo xiaoqian pin de nanzi", *Mu Shinying daibiao zuo*, ed. Wu Fuzhun, Zhou Ming, and Wang Zhijun (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 1998), 58-83.
- ⁸ Zhang, *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai*, 166-167.
- ⁹ *People's Republic of Desire*, 365-368.
- ¹⁰ *People's Republic of Desire*, 195-197.
- ¹¹ Lu, "The True Story of Ah Q," *A Call to Arms*, 107-111.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 71.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 97.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 111-112.
- ¹⁸ "Lu Xun: A Prince of the Literary Kingdom," *People's Daily online*, July 13, 2000. http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/english/200007/13/eng20000713_45439.html (accessed September 8, 2005)
- ¹⁹ Shuo Wang, "Wanzhu" (Trouble Makers), *Shouhuo (Harvest)* 6 (1987): 24-52.
- ²⁰ Shih, 110.
- ²¹ Merle Goldman, ed., *Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 81-84.
- ²² Kirk A. Denton, Bruce Fulton, and Sharalyn Orbaugh, ed. Joshua Mustow, *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 380.
- ²³ Shih, 110-111.
- ²⁴ Mian, author's note. This quote was found in the author's note that precedes the first chapter. There is no page number to list here.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 12-13.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 71-72.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 81, 94, 96.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 96-98.
- ³⁰ Jian Cui, online posting of English lyrics, "Let Me Go Wild in the Snow," <http://www.cuijian.com/ENGLISH/Pages/works/works.html> (accessed August 26, 2006)
- ³¹ Shi, *Lure of the Modern*, 307 - 309.
- ³² Richard Spencer, "Naughty Mu is Banned by the Men in China's Yellow Room," *News Telegraph* (London), September 12, 2003. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml:xml=/news/2003/12/09/wblog09.xml> (accessed October 19, 2005).
- ³³ "Net sex writer stirs emotions," *Sydney Morning Herald Online*, December 2, 2003. <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/12/01/1070127357698.html> (accessed October 19, 2005)
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Jim Yardley, "Internet Sex Column Thrills, and Inflames, China," *The New York Times Online*, November 30, 2003. <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/30/world/internet-sex-column-thrills-and-inflames-china.html> (accessed February 4, 2006)

³⁸ "Han Han: Trend Leader," *Danwei*, November 9, 2007. http://www.danwei.org/magazines/trend_leader_han_han.php (accessed December 12, 2007)

³⁹ Barmé, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture*, 70.

⁴⁰ Lee, *Romantic Generation*, 39-40.

⁴¹ Yiyang Wang, *Narrating China: Jia Pingwa and His Fictional World* (London: Routledge, 2006), 72-74.

⁴² Jin Ba, *Family* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1989), 211-214.

⁴³ Ibid., 257 – 258.

Conclusion

Pop Culture Déjà vu Revisited

The emergence and development of the spontaneous urban popular culture that is alive and thriving in today's China is not the first of its kind in modern Chinese history. This thesis examined three significant ways in which the urban popular culture of post Mao China parallels that of the Republican era. The sociopolitical conditions present in both eras that made China ripe for the emergence of spontaneous urban pop culture are strikingly similar. The specific circumstances are not identical. Indeed, Republican era China was emerging from a very long period of imperial rule and semi-isolation; post Mao era China was emerging from the strict confines of the Maoist era. Republican era society was shifting away from the moral authority and social control of Confucianism; post Mao society was shifting away from the moral authority and social control of the Chinese Communist Party. Technological advances of the Republican era included such innovations as the mechanized printing press, the radio, photography, and moving films; technological advances of the post Mao era included the Internet, cell phones, satellite television, and personal computers. The rapid economic growth of both periods has been different in scale and the type and amount of foreign influences of both periods are not identical. Surprisingly, though, the identity messages on individualism and cosmopolitanism, as well

as the identity types most often celebrated through the urban pop culture of both eras are amazingly similar.

Although these two periods of Chinese history are separated by over thirty intervening years of the Maoist era, it is important to note that if the dates and the authors of the cultural works examined here were not known to the reader, some of the examples cited from the post Mao era in these chapters would be difficult to distinguish from similar examples from the Republican era. The pop culture of both eras promotes similar identity messages about individuality – that individuality is important and worthy of expression, that it is permissible and potentially beneficial to bring private issues into the public sphere, that change and experimentation are inevitable, and that through embracing the spirit of these messages one can contribute to building a more pluralistic society. As for identity messages regarding cosmopolitanism, again, the pop culture of both eras promote similar messages – that it is important to think of oneself as a global citizen, that part of being a global citizen involves enlarging the context in which one lives one's life, that social mores and attitudes are constantly changing, and that part of the responsibility of being a global citizen involves learning to tolerate several points of view other than your own and celebrating differences. Through exploring one's own unique identity in the context of urban popular culture one may actually find a more meaningful community or collective body of other people with which one identifies; Chinese urban popular culture from

both eras provides multiple venues for exploring the attitudes, experiences, and the very individuality of oneself and other people, both real and fictional. Through its messages it sends out into society multiple points of possible connection and possible contention, which in some part fuel the continuation of pop culture creation.

At the time I realized that some aspects of post Mao Chinese culture and society reminded me of what I imagined Republican era Chinese culture and society to be I had no idea how much that original thought would influence my area of study. I also had no idea just *how* much the urban pop culture of both eras would capture my imagination and fuel my curiosity. Spontaneous urban pop culture in the Republican era China was curtailed by the onset of the Maoist era. Having already witnessed the first thirty years of post Mao era urban pop culture, I am curious to see what direction it will take and how China will be changed because of it.

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