

Writing the Female Body: Ambiguities and Challenges in the East Asian Context

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“Women must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing ... women must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement.”
—Hélène Cixous “The Laugh of the Medusa”

“Write your self. Your body must be heard.’ Since Hélène Cixous first issued this call in 1975, there have been continual attempts to sort out just what it means, what a discourse that ‘let the body be heard’ would look like, and whether it is even possible. What would it mean for the body to have a language? What would the body say?”
—Diane Price Herndl *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*

Introduction

One of the striking focuses in the expansive volumes of women’s writings in the past several decades is the body, the corporeal female body as experienced by women who are no longer held in shame or “self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallogentrism.”¹⁾ Much of this interest comes from the popularization that has taken place of canonical feminist texts by writers like Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. In particular, since Hélène Cixous’ call on women to write her self, her body, the image of the “overflowing” female body “full of luminous torrents” that could “burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a stinking fortune” has become a powerful and dominating feature in women’s writings in general.²⁾ In fact, the body has gone through a process from being a newly liberated metaphor to something close to a cliché.³⁾ To create what Hélène Cixous refers to as *écriture féminine*, or female writing, a text that generates from the female body, becomes a challenge and a new goal for many women writers including non-western writers. The two women writers chosen for this paper, Wei Hui and Amy (Eimi) Yamada, are not necessarily engaged in actively or consciously responding to Hélène Cixous’ call to “return to the body.” Nonetheless, each woman produces a text that in some ways offers a “look” of what this female writing might be like.⁴⁾ Being Asian, each writer’s text carries its own cultural specificity given the fact that each is situated in a different cultural environment than the west. And being a popular writer, each embodies her feminine textuality with a sensibility that appeals more to the general reading public than the academy.

Wei Hui (born 1963), a Shanghai native, and Amy Yamada (born 1959), a Tokyo native, are both fiction writers that excel at portraying young urban women’s love

lives. The popularity of both writers largely derives from their candid and explicit depiction of sexual relationships and the sexual act itself. This paper seeks to examine closely insights both writers provide regarding what constitutes the essence of a post-feminist notion of romance for women writers that insist on incorporating not only the female but also the male body into their narrative. By divulging into ambiguities and ambivalences that are embedded in each writer's discourse of female sexuality, this paper seeks to illuminate areas where various strategies of liberating potential become problematic. Although in different degrees, both writers succeed at destabilizing gender categories and formation processes by granting their female characters powerful sexual agency, their texts reveal difficulties women face when their search for sexual *jouissance* becomes inevitably intertwined with the force of global capitalization and the unconscious practice of othering. Their effort to link, if not integrate, female sexuality, gender binaries, and racial ideologies in the social-political and cultural-literary context of present-day China and Japan is plausible, even when the final product is less than satisfactory in providing answers to the questions their texts raise.

Taboos, Banning, Marketable Value

Writing the body in China and Japan, two societies that have long been influenced by Confucian ethics, means breaking taboo topics in literature, or at least touching upon shocking subjects.⁵⁾ This is exactly how media in both countries have received Wei Hui and Yamada. Typically, their texts articulate and foreground a sexual pleasure in terms of female erogenous experiences. The female sexual discourse depicted in texts such as Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby* and *Marrying Buddha*, and Yamada's "Bedtime Eyes," "The Piano Player's Fingers," "When a Man Loves a Woman," and *Trash*, is intensely personal and closely connected to the meaning and process of self-identification for the female protagonists.⁶⁾ For these women, self-recognition comes from their own sexual maturation, which also in turn provides emotional and spiritual meaning.

In mainland China, "body," whether male or female, was traditionally a heavily coded word only discussed and written about indirectly or is simply skipped over. Indeed up till the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, mainland Chinese literature had a very much somatophobic relationship with the corporeal body and its cultural and biological functions. Individuality, subjectivity, sexuality, and privacy were concepts arbitrarily submerged or conveniently erased within the larger category of class under the social-political ideology of the time. The natural human body, especially the female body, was forced to hide behind the unisex Mao-uniform with all of its forever expanding and contracting shapes, forms, and leaky fluids denied their right to existence or presence in writing. It is no wonder that once the open door policy was in place the human form also began to undress itself hastily.

Beginning from the late 1980s and into the 1990s, many mainland women writers explored the female body as a new territory for narrative voice. Most major women writers of that time were consciously investigating ways to incorporate the female body into their narrative, which engendered an impressive corpus of women's writings. From the more subtle psychological descriptions of the female sexual desire, as in Wang Anyi and Tiening, to the bolder descriptions of homoerotic experiences as in Lin Bai, Chen Ran, and Hong Ying, "privacy literature" became a new genre of wom-

en's writing and a hot new item perused by a publishing industry that began to test new boundaries in the new free market economy.⁷⁾ The famous case involving debate over the nature of Lin Bai's novel *A War with Oneself* illustrates women writers' new confidence and ease with risqué subjects and the public hunger for everything private, especially those categorized as somewhat autobiographical. The center of the debate was on a few explicit passages dealing with the heroine's masturbation and whether this kind of material should be labeled as pornography.⁸⁾

Around the time when the World Women's Conference was held in Beijing in 1995, many publishers rushed into the race of producing series of writings by women writers. All of a sudden terms such as privacy, personal life, or writing, body, and desire became catchwords and determining content for publishers to promote any woman's work.⁹⁾ On the one hand, Chinese intellectuals, men and women, began quoting Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Simone de Beauvoir regardless of the relevance when their object of critique was woman. On the other hand, body and writing were bonded as if lost twins reunited by a money-driven book market. The media became relentless when they sensed the selling power of young women writers' "private language." Market forces, publishing freedom, women's views, and the closer interaction with anything foreign, from philosophical ideas to superfluous consumer products, thus made it possible for an urban centered popular literature to flourish.

It was under this craze for privacy that Wei Hui began publishing her fiction. A highly educated, talented, and cosmopolitan singleton who graduated from an elite university in Shanghai, Wei Hui proves to be a shrewd self-promoter as well, an "active agent" who participates in and oversees the final product of her books to be consumed in perfect packages.¹⁰⁾ The official banning of *Shanghai Baby* shortly after its publication in 1999 elevated, rather than damaged, her reputation as a "literary beauty that shatters taboos."¹¹⁾ Labeled as "decadent and debauchery," Wei Hui was readily viewed as the true model that gives the identity of her first-person narrator. It is certainly true that the novel treads upon, if not deals with in depth, many issues considered taboo by the official publishing industry. But more than that, the warm reception the book received mostly from the urban youth group surely indicates that the novel presented a truthful reality that they feel they can relate to.¹²⁾ Sexual adventures, drug and alcohol abuse, gender and identity instability, these are already taken as a given by the relatively wealthy urban chic crowd. The success of numerous copycat stories came up immediately all lumped under the same genre, referred to as "Beauty Fiction" or "Baby Fiction," testifies to this fact. Pretty women writing risqué urban romance dedicated to an unprecedented openness in descriptions of sexuality became a new literary phenomenon.¹³⁾ After Lin Bai's exile as a "soft porn writer" in 1994, in but a few years one could see the complete ideological submission to the logic of marketable value that began to manipulate literature as cultural products like any other consumer items. By the end of the 1990s, the mainland Chinese literary scene was plagued by a large scale invasion of body writing. It might be possible to see this as part of a general cultural sentiment of depoliticization occurring after the Tiananmen massacre in 1989.

Despite sociopolitical differences in Japan and China, as a popular fiction writer Amy Yamada earned her fame in quite a similar way to Wei Hui, by her bold depic-

tions of sex scenes. Immediately after the first publication of her novella “Bedtime Eyes” in 1985, she was besieged by public attention.¹⁴⁾ The setting of the American military base outside Tokyo in the story, and the love-sex affair between a Japanese woman and an African-American soldier was a rarity to the Japanese readers at that time. Much more than Wei Hui, Yamada’s text explodes with all the juicy details of the female body in sexual *jouissance*. The public also responded in a very similar way: they enthusiastically identified Yamada as the model behind her literary heroine, adding a voyeuristic thrill to the reading experience.

Contemporary Japanese women writers, in comparison with their Chinese counterparts, have enjoyed much more freedom in expressing the pleasure of writing their body. Nonetheless, they were subjugated to similar scrutiny and the occasional ostracization for writing intimate details about their body. Setouchi Jakuchō, the well-known Buddhist nun and writer and recipient of an Order of Culture award in 2007, received the same criticism and verdict as Lin Bai fifty years ago. Her story “The Stamen” was considered pornographic and banned as well. Labeled as a “womb writer,” Setouchi was openly shunned as a scoundrel by the public as well as by the publishing industry.¹⁵⁾

A casual examination of the major works produced by women writers in Japan in the so-called women’s decade, reveals a much different kind of topography as far as women’s body is concerned.¹⁶⁾ Famous women writers such as Kōno Taeko, Takahashi Takako, Kanai Mieko, Enchi Fumiko, Ōba Minako, and Kurahashi Yumiko have all confronted the problem of the female body with honesty and gusto. They may not focus directly on the female genitalia, or on the male genitalia, for that matter, and reveal all the bodily secrets, there is nonetheless an undeniable presence of the female body presented through discourses of the sensuous or psychological. For the first time women’s sensual experiences related specifically to their sexuality, the smell, the fluids, the touch, as well as threateningly dark images of psychological forces of often unfulfilled sexual longing, gave a new sensibility to women’s writing in general. It was as if these women were responding to H el ene Cixous without consciously knowing it.

Three decades later when Yamada began publishing her hardcore romance of young urban female Tokyoites, the public and literary authorities reacted surprisingly positively. “The Bedtime Eyes” earned Yamada not only the Bungei Award, but also a nomination for the Akutagawa Award, both important awards for the seriously literary minded. Even Yamada herself was a bit shocked by the unanticipated approval by the literary big names.¹⁷⁾ The explicit language of the sexual act, the sadomasochist emotional display, and the frequent occurrence of profane expressions (written in *katakana*) did not seem to raise any eyebrows of rejection or disdain. Instead, they invited admiration and even respect from her cohort writers for mapping out new territories through inventive use of the Japanese language.¹⁸⁾

Sexualized Femininity

Many of Wei Hui’s and Yamada’s works can be seen as an attempt at reinventing, or face-lifting, the so-called conservative “feminine” genre of romance fiction, which has been a popular genre especially for women readers throughout many different generations and crossing geographical borders. Feminists typically regard romantic

love narrative as devaluation of women, and giving a “safe” expression to female fears about heterosexuality.¹⁹⁾ Wei Hui and Yamada both present a new model of this genre with an aesthetic synchronic to the consumerist pop cultural meaning making mechanism. Instead of identifying women as love objects, they grant women full autonomy and control of their subject position. They also forcefully forgo the marriage plot, only focusing on sexual relationships. The simple sex in the city theme is often delineated through a female first-person narrator, giving their text a strong sense of confessional narrative. The interloping of subjectivity of the writer and narrator ensures the authenticity of the text, which feeds the public’s voyeuristic desire to probe. Both Wei Hui’s and Yamada’s texts can be said to be entirely female from the point of view, the experiences, and the use of language. Also, their model of romance insists on a discourse of sexualized femininity which is completely dependent on a male presence.

What makes the connection between Wei Hui and Yamada possible is their unashamed display and savoring of intimate moments of sexual pleasure. Their women characters show no constraint in seeking out attractive males that fit their fancy and sometimes show no mercy to captivate the object of their desire. From the pleasure of casting the gaze onto the male body, to the initiation and manipulation of the sexual act, Wei Hui and Yamada map out new literary territories with the promise of subversive feminist potential.

From Wei Hui’s *Coco*, the heroine of both *Shanghai Baby* and *Marrying Buddha*, to Yamada’s Kim of “Bedtime Eyes,” Ruiko of “The Piano Player’s Fingers,” and the nameless first-person narrator in “When a Man Loves a Woman,” none of the urban chicks conform to the conventional decorous filial subservient good girl image. In fact, sexual aggression and expression is seen as a matter of pride for self-definition. When *Coco* first sought out Mark, and Kim first cast her eyes on Spoon, the sex scene that immediately follows in both stories is delineated in a very similar fashion. Both scenes begin at a bar and move to a private space, *Coco* and Mark in a women’s restroom and Kim and Spoon in a boiler room. The uncomfortable standing position, mixed smells of the offensive, or at least unpleasant, environment and bodily discharge, the small and unnatural space cannot dissuade Kim’s aggression and *Coco*’s excitement—each writer vividly brings out her heroine’s obvious pleasure in engaging in a slightly risqué act while clearly in possession of their sexual agency.

Typically, their texts are full of descriptions like these:

His golden body hairs were like fine rays of sunlight, zealously and intimately nibbling at my body. The tip of his rum-soaked tongue teased my nipples, then moved slowly downward. He penetrated my protective labia with deadly accuracy and located my budding clitoris. This coolness of the rum mingled with the warmth of his tongue and made me fell faint. I could feel a rush of liquid flow out of my uterus, and then he went inside ... I imagined what he would be like in high boots and a leather coat, and what kind of cruelty would show in those Teutonic blue eyes. These thoughts increased my excitement ...

(Wei Hui, *Shanghai Baby*, 63).

I clawed desperately at his jacket and tore at his shirt buttons. I couldn’t wait to

have his scent on me. But there was no letup from his hands or his tongue, and I was so excited that I couldn't stop my hands from shaking long enough to undo the buttons. I finally gave up and ripped the shirt open ... I pressed my lips to his chest, tugging at his chest hair and enjoying the smell of his body ... It was both pungent and sweet, like cocoa butter. A strange smell came from under his arm, too. It was musty, not offensive, but at the same time not pleasant either. It was the kind of smell that made me aware of our primal attraction ...

(Yamada, "Bedtime Eyes," 5).

Feminists have argued, but without reaching consensus, regarding what a female writing would be like or do. They do agree, however, on the definitive textures or styles of this writing. Simply put, "fluidity," "plurality," "multiplicity," "open," "spontaneity," and "indeterminacy" are seen as crucial for an oppositional discourse that "resists or undermines the patriarchal desire for mastery, repression and control."²⁰ Rita Fel-ski points out: "The open and polysemic text is assumed to be the primary concern of a feminism which defines itself in terms of a recovery of *jouissance* a valorization of erotic drives in literature."²¹ In this sense, Wei Hui and Yamada can be understood as taking a feminist stance and actively seeking to emancipate a female psychosexuality from a sense of cultural marginalization. However, a closer examination of the texts will reveal fundamental difficulties involved in changing the power structure under the influence of patriarchal cultural formations and representation of gender. The exploration of women's psychosexual identity is fraught with anxiety and ambivalence, which affects Wei Hui and Yamada in similar and different ways.

Wei Hui starts out with *Shanghai Baby* as a romance that sticks to the mantra that sex overrules all. Coco is an ambitious young Shanghai woman struggling to establish herself as a writer. She lives with her Chinese lover Tian Tian and enjoys secret rendezvous with Mark, a married German corporate member of the expat community. Toward the end of the book, however, Coco finds herself helplessly in love with Mark, supposedly a mere "sex partner." Here, Wei Hui's new model of sex romance fails to establish itself, but resorts to an old-fashioned narrative structure: the adulterous woman is eventually dumped by the adulterous man who dutifully returns to the unknowing wife. The sexualized femininity fails to deliver ultimate happiness or even a real sense of liberation. The split between the public social identity and the psychosexual identity widens, and the female subjectivity destabilizes. Coco laments at the end of the book: "Who am I? ... Who am I?" Coco is left in a state of loneliness after Tian Tian's death and Mark's departure that reveals her fragile sense of being.

Ironically the only subversive gesture comes from Coco's stealing of Mark's wedding ring. Coco unconsciously steps back into the old romantic love narrative dictated by the marriage plot. All of her sexual audacity amounts to a small rupture symbolized by the stealing of the ring, and Coco can only resort to self-sarcasm: being a material girl at heart, the expensive sapphire ring is a beautiful object after all.

Like Wei Hui, Yamada often uses first-person narrative and creates a sex *jouissance*-oriented romance that foregoes the marriage plot or other forms of social binding or attachment. Unlike Wei Hui, whose sex romance focuses on her heroine's struggle for self-identity, frustration to balance the need of a public, success-oriented self and the

desire for control over a psychosexual agency, Yamada often locates her heroine in a marginalized social position and isolates them from any familial connections. Kim is a jazz singer working at one of the numerous lucrative nightclubs in downtown Tokyo. Ruiko has no occupation, but enjoys being a party animal cruising various hot spots hunting for sexual prey. Yamada typically interrogates her characters closely from an interior and subjective position. In fact, her heroines are often situated in the interior of an apartment building, and seldom venture into the world outside. Yamada is only interested in examining the structure and workings of psychosexual dynamics of female subjectivity when erotic drives are given total freedom to reign.

While Wei Hui's model fails to address the problem of an ending without interference of emotional attachment in the form of love, Yamada's texts are unable to provide a real liberating kind of happiness for her heroines. This happiness is seen as closely linked to the tragic endings of her African-American males, who are permanently scarred by a victimized past, and indefinitely trapped in between the impossibility to neither forget nor forgive, and the desire to free themselves from this position. What started as a pure and equal and free exchange of sexual energy turns out to be fraught with difficulties and deeper meanings. Kim sadly admits: "... it was far more difficult to lick his wounds than to suck his cock" ("Bedtime Eyes," 3).

In Yamada, both her female and male characters end in a profound sense of defeat and sadness, the male characters even have to pay the price of their lives. Spoon of "Bedtime Eyes" is caught by the police for attempting to sell army secrets after becoming an army deserter; Leroy of "The Piano Player's Fingers" dies in a violent accident when Ruiko knocks over a bronze statuette that hits his head; Rick of *Trash* is killed in a car accident after struggling without success with alcoholism and violent behavior. It is extremely difficult to see how the likes of Kim and Ruiko would regain their previous total self-confidence in sexual fulfillment. They are more likely to be left in a state of self-doubt if not permanent guilt. Both will be forced to resort to conventional narrative structure: to live on memories of sad longing generated from a (male) absence. The ironic closing of distance between Yamada's sexually liberated and dominant women and the numerous women depicted in the Heian court reveals the difficulty and ambivalence in the making of a subversive female text. In both Wei Hui and Yamada, the body discourse remains fractured and weakened at the end, unable to generate truly liberating force. The body remains a separate entity, permanently looking for an anchoring position. Their female protagonists seem to be trapped rather than empowered. The force of conventional romantic structure threatens to dismantle formation and identification of psychosexual being, which is seen as crucial in these female characters' self-definition. The texts of these two writers are unable to foresee an ending that truly engenders happiness for a liberated female subjectivity.

Erotizing the Foreign Male Body

Modern China and Japan each experiences a love and hate relationship with the west, alternating in different positions along the paradigm of the aggressive and the receptive. In recent decades, global capitalist economy has become the new ideology that enforces a new power structure in the world. In this post-colonial discourse, domination of power is more dependent upon different strategies of negotiation that is

more nuanced and less distinguishable between oppressor and the oppressed. It is interesting to see Wei Hui and Yamada, consciously or subconsciously, examine this relationship through a sexual discourse that is both literal and metaphorical. In their texts, the western foreign male is reduced to body and to an objective position to fulfill a sexual, erotic, and narrative drive, and is subjugated to female securitization and appropriation. His admirable physique is the direct opposite of the native male, who is portrayed as feminized or simply absent. At times, he even provides spiritual or artistic guidance, leading his woman toward a transcendental destiny.

Wei Hui's insistence on copulating her literary heroine with foreign males seems innocent and befitting the cosmopolitan image of Shanghai at the end of the twentieth century. Yet a closer look at how these foreign male figures are constructed in her narrative reveals a kind of ambivalence that has a larger implication that has to do with the complex subconscious workings of an unequivocal relationship of the west and the orient.

The major male characters in Wei Hui's fiction are pitted against each other in a way that dramatizes the demographic tension in the 1990s cosmopolitan Shanghai. On the one side are the local urban youth, a new breed that grew up in a time of cultural hybridity, fast economic development, and open contact with the west. They are able to sample a lifestyle largely similar to that in any western urban setting, ubiquitously in pursuit of sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll. What is interesting about this group in Wei Hui's representation is that they are hopelessly weak spirited, physically feeble, and often diseased. Tian Tian, the Shanghai native and impotent lover of Coco, sums up this chic yet pathetic group. He is the ultimate example of the lost urban youth, failure even before being defeated. Victimized as a child of unhappy marriage and yet indulging himself with a parasitic lifestyle, he ends in the final self-pitying or denial act by dissipating his life away through drug abuse. In comparison, gloriously spirited, masculine bodied and superbly wealthy foreign male fill the other side of the camp, the successful corporate type. Mark, the walking metaphor of global capital, makes the extreme opposite of Tian Tian in Chinese *yin-yang* principle: Mark's masculinity obscures and overshadows Tian Tian's femininity.

Wei Hui's western male characters are almost always delineated through animal metaphors and military or economic terms. Mark "is like a pitiless beast, like a soldier breaking through enemy lines, like an enforcer giving a beating ..." (*Shanghai Baby*, 251). His eyes "were shining in the darkness, like those of an animal lurking in the shrubbery..." (*Shanghai Baby*, 29). Most importantly, Coco unabashedly admires his "monstrous plaything" (*Shanghai Baby*, 207). Mark, the name that coincides with a powerful monetary system is more than a simple choice. Coco imagines these male lovers through images that plague the colonial narratives: hunter, heavy booted soldier, mulatto, assassin, and expensive present-giver. The bidding game between Coco's New Yorker pursuer Nick and old flame Qi Feihong in *Marrying Buddha* illustrates how closely sex, love, and purchasing power are connected. And women, liberated and autonomous as Coco, are still subjugated to be the trophy object.²²⁾ The Ferragamo Christmas tree at 8,000RMB, the outrageous prize and public envy surely boosts Coco's pride as an oriental princess. And again the natural winner is Nick, whose foreign currency-backed monetary reserve relentlessly outweighs the Chinese ambitious

young.²³⁾ Here again is a déjà vu scene of colonial romance. The nouveau riche setting and the brand name-clad bodies makes Wei Hui's fantasy romance all the more reeking of nostalgic decadence. From the beginning, this relationship with a western man is marred by a power structure that puts Coco in a disadvantageous position. To enter into this relationship complicates Coco's ability for self-agency. On the one hand, she is the fully independent, newly liberated woman who relies on her own choice and power for sexual pleasure. Time and time again, Coco is able to come to the state of sexual *jouissance* with Mark's image in her mind and Tian Tian by her side. On the other hand, she can only relate her self to Mark, and later to Nick and to Muju in *Marrying Buddha*, through metaphors laden with colonial meaning. Thus, addressing herself as both the oriental princess and the China doll, Coco willingly succumbs her body to become an accomplice in a power exchange. Coco's adoration for the foreign male body is sensuous and also suggestive of sadomasochist tendencies. The superfluously knowledgeable Coco quotes Sylvia Plath to justify her fantasies of Mark in army uniform: "Every woman adores a Fascist / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you ..." (*Shanghai Baby*, 63). Wei Hui's discourse of feminine sexuality is established on shaky grounds, dependent upon an unequal expression of gender and racial positioning.

Unlike Wei Hui who casts the native feminine male body in an unfavorable light against the overtly masculine body of the foreign male, in Yamada's works, the native Japanese male body is often presented as an absent entity, which enhances the absolute presence of the powerful foreign body, the tough and beautiful African-American male. Yamada prefers a straightforward even brutal prose that bypasses romantic sentiment and drives directly to the sex organ. Adoring the African-American male organ, Kim is disgusted by what she calls "the pathetic infantile thing of Japanese men"—she even despises to address it properly, ("Bedtime Eyes," 5). This clearly explains the overwhelming absence of Japanese males in Yamada's fiction: they are less than real men and not worth dealing with seriously. Yamada examines her heroine's sexual relationship with black men from a racialism that exploits the African-American male symbol. Yamada delineates her black (anti-)heroes solely in physical terms. Their eroticized and idealized bodies are in unnatural proportions to their unstable psychological state.²⁴⁾

Yamada's males tend to suffer from a split between a perfect façade, the statuesque figure and an extreme vulnerable and often pathetic interiority. The tragic endings that occur to many of her male African-American characters, such as death (often in violent accidents) or jail terms, reveal Yamada's guilt or ambivalence towards her female character's lust and appropriation of the male foreign other. Simply reversing the gaze and appropriating desire for self-definition proves to be more problematic than women first realize.

Yamada's model of "body writing" distinguishes itself by its matter-of-fact description of the sexual act, and associations of sensory images, often food related. These sensual images give the text a soft, hazy and slippery feel. Under the raw and brutal honesty of the first-person narrative, there is also a strong feeling of sadness creeping up every page. The African-American males of Yamada's works roughly fit into two types. The majority of them are like Spoon: despite their model-like physical body,

they seem to suffer from a deeply engrained low self-esteem. Prone to drug abuse, alcoholism, physical violence, and despicable personality, they are represented as vulnerable, pitiful, and hopelessly childish. These qualities of weakness nonetheless enhance, not lessen, their appeal in the eyes of the female characters.

Here, Yamada's women are given a different dimension that Wei Hui's women lack: a deeply ingrained animal like maternal instinct. It is almost as if they instinctually seek out these troubled African-American men/babies to fulfill an emotional need to protect them, and protect them through their body. The sexual addiction to the African-American phallus becomes subconsciously entangled with a psychological need for love. Ultimately, this helps further secure the African-American male's position as other in Yamada's discursive exploration of female sexuality.²⁵ The all-encompassing sexual drive from both sexes are the definitive force between the narrative structure and is constantly threatened by a death instinct present in all of the major male characters of Yamada's narrative. Spoon's desertion from the army and stealing of military secrets, not to mention his drug abuse; Leroy's obsession with revenging a wounded ego through violent sadomasochist sex that leads to his tragic death by accident; or Rick's alcoholism and eventual death because of it—Yamada's penchant for tragedy for her male gods constantly undermines her female character's search for complete sexual *jouissance*.

These black men are forever trapped by their racial burden of inferiority and a narcissistic ego. Keeping these black figures in a perpetually self-pitying and self-centered position reinforces an ideology that cannot envision possibilities of transcending the victim psychology. In this sense, Yamada's strategy to identify these African-American males in the same marginalized social position as her female figures fails to present an alternative for reconfiguration of power and difference for either group. In "Bedtime Eyes," "The Piano Player's Fingers," and *Trash*, the main characters, men and women, fail to reach the state of true love. They simply are incapable of it. They resort to carnal pleasure through violent sadomasochist sex acts to communicate their true feelings. This is the only resource that compensates for the fact that they cannot verbalize or articulate their feelings.

Although the majority of Yamada's male characters are darkly tragic, occasionally they are able to transcend the black other position. In a story entitled "When a Man Loves a Woman," Yamada writes a light fantasy romance and ends it with an unusually feel-good happiness for both male and female characters. Willy Roy, the lead man, is the direct opposite of her typical self-destructive African-American male in temperament: confident, calm, full of self-control and yet extremely sensitive, and most of all, mature. A combination of a model-like body and fairy tale prince-like sunny disposition makes this a pure post-feminist fantasy, impossibly cheerful and even comic. The princely muse helps the first-person narrator to finish her painting, ironically through his inhumanly self-control of his phallic impulse. Ultimately, Yamada's narrative pays tribute to the bearer of phallic power symbolized by the African-American male, and contains the female narrator's sexual urge. In this, Yamada fetishizes the black male physically and spiritually. Willy Roy, as the ending suggests, is clearly the imagination of the first-person narrator's mind, the result of her need for a muse. Yet within the framework of fantasy, he is in command of her creative and sexual drive. Unlike

Spoon and Leroy, both of whom become objectified by the female psyche in a similar way that women have been objectified by phallic desire, Willy Roy slides between the objectifying and objectified position without internal conflict. This can be achieved only because Willy Roy is an empty signifier, completely cut off from any social-literary and politico-economical condition. He is apolitical and ahistorical, a perfect fantasy prince.²⁶⁾

In Wei Hui's *Marrying Buddha*, Muju has a similar function as Willy Roy, as spiritual, as well as sexual, guidance to Coco's unsatisfied and imbalanced psyche. More realistically drawn, Muju is also idealized: successful, self-confident, constantly under self-control, understanding with a new age sense of seeking happiness for self and others, and very materialistic at the same time. He brings a new look to Wei Hui's international corporate type typified by Mark or Nick. He is more oriental in appearance, and apparently in soul, too. A spiritual dimension sets him apart. Being of mixed western and oriental (Japanese) heritage seems to betray Wei Hui's ambiguity toward her own utilitarian view of the western male as shown in *Shanghai Baby*. Wei Hui devotes many pages making up an exotic story about Muju's past, about how he came to follow a Zen master in seeking the truth. Showing his sincerity, Muju once cut off his little finger. This comic reminder of a typical yakuza act of loyalty underlines Wei Hui's desperate need to convince her literary self that there is something more in this relationship, in her, than her "addiction" to sex with him (*Marrying Buddha*, 51).²⁷⁾

At the end of the novel, Coco's emotional dependency on Muju unfolds a subconscious desire for her native land. Through Muju, Coco discovers her longing for identification with the east. At the end of her trajectory that takes her from Shanghai to New York and other cities in Europe and Latin America, physically and sexually, she chooses to return to the east, and not to the new capital center of Shanghai, but to a utopian island, alone. Or not quite alone - she is now pregnant with the child of either Nick or Muju.²⁸⁾

Wei Hui's ambivalence of her heroine's sexuality as shown in *Marrying Buddha* comes from the metaphoric meaning of return that works at different levels of consciousness in the text. The geographical return to Coco's birthplace of Putuo Island is also a symbolic return to the maternal womb. Her mother gave birth to her on the same island. Now pregnant herself, this return marks a new beginning in a cycle that connects mother and daughter in matrilineal discourse. To align this awakening of the maternal instinct with a spiritual life source brings the narrative a kind of pre-modern utopian purity, a retreat to the pre-Oedipal stage of self. To evoke the semiotic mother, the memories of the mother from childhood, strengthens the link of the mother and daughter relationship for Coco psychologically. This seems a plausible feminist move toward reassessing the real meaning of the feminine, yet it is also an escapist solution.

The novel's final sentence is Coco's inner voice, a mandate from her subconscious need for self-redemption, telling her to "marry Buddha." The reader cannot help but wonder: is the oriental princess adventurer to be made to mend her debauchery and decadent ways? The irony of positioning this spiritual choice as the logical alternative to a conscious pursuit of sexual experimentation and freedom will not be lost on the reader. This very conventional narrative ending will only put Wei Hui's entire corpus

of writing into a question mark. From seeking self-identity through sexual *jouissance* to accepting a self-imposed resolution of sexual self-discipline and denial, Coco becomes a heroine of pre-feminist romance: a good woman/mother, full of good intentions and abilities for self-sacrifice. And sadly, it is the body that will be sacrificed. The body is ready to retreat from the discourse of female narrative. Or at least this seems the logic conclusion. Wei Hui returns to the trap of conventional feminine discourse that fails to encompass a woman's sexual identity at the point when motherhood becomes a reality, when the woman is forced back to the role-defining position as a mother figure without prospect for a psychosexual self.

Native Tongue, Foreign Accent

Apart from using the foreign western male as a metaphor to examine sexual economy in cross-racial relationships, both Wei Hui and Yamada seek for sources to vitalize their native language from the west as well. In their writings, words clearly from western origin are part and parcel to the visual presentation of the text. Moreover, they are incorporated into the narrative to foreground a post-modern sensibility. In Yamada's case, *katakana* loan words of American slang, music lyrics from blues and jazz, enhance her fascination with African-American (male) culture. In Wei Hui's case, rock'n'roll lyrics, quotes from famous or obscure literary works, original English words related to fashion and trends, and names of people and places all serve to emphasize a "cool" state of existence. The Occident is repackaged as exotic cultural objects, often forcing a new or different meaning from the original context, serving as a flavor, a spice or an accessory item to the female narrative prose style.

To visualize the language, to change the look of the written word by inserting sources outside their respective origins and deviating from the common practice is Wei Hui and Yamada's passion to destabilize the patriarchal system of representation. In Wei Hui's case, both of her major works follow the same visual lead introduction to each chapter: quotations of varying lengths by the random postmodern practice of collage, some well-known, others obscure, from Tagore to Lao Tzu, from Madonna to Coco Chanel to Mother Teresa, all become canonical and intertextual. Often a series of quotes appear together, with a very casual link through obvious themes. Sometimes religious or philosophical, other times sentimental and superficial—the content of the exact meaning of these passages are obviously less important than the fact that they are there. It is interesting to note that except for Lao Tzu, Zen masters, and Tang Dynasty poets, the absolute majority of those quoted are of foreign origin.

The exotic impact is undeniable. Especially, words pertinent to the lifestyle of any urban subculture youths in pursuit of fast living and those that have yet to find commonly accepted Chinese equivalents, surely appeal to the curious and hungry Chinese readership. A quick scan finds these words: "groupie," "hip-hop," "shopping," "gay," "hash," "high," "party-animal" and even "post-colonial"—words that sound cool in English, regardless of how remote the chance for the common Chinese to actually use any of them. The ultimate goal is to learn to have them, as owning a Gucci bag. The fact that they only appear at the beginning of each chapter, as a separate entity, shows their "accessory" function—a cutesy way to disrupt the flow of the story.

Wei Hui presents her text through a polyvocal discourse that enlivens rather than

dictates the narrative progression of the story itself. It is an ingenious strategy to disrupt an otherwise overly linear structure of the text. The casual, illogic, all encompassing and indiscriminating inclusive act of overbursting with ideas concurs with what western feminist theorists have insisted upon: female writing recognizes and enforces the importance of the spontaneous overflow of language as crucial to its creative power. By appropriating and recontextualizing expressions of universal truths with no hierarchical discrimination of meaning, Wei Hui's text becomes open and centrifugal, rather than linear and rigidly controlled. On the other hand, Wei Hui's unashamed borrowing of these foreign literary sources remains problematic. The exotic utility function of the text's foreignness reinforces the commercial aspect of the production of popular literary writings by writers like Wei Hui. Rather than generating constructive meaning, it remains superficially cosmetic.

In Yamada's case, it is also a foreign source that alters the look of the Japanese written language. Instead of Wei Hui's sporadic literary choice, Yamada prefers the street language of the much less polished and educated African-American male gender. By inserting large sections of *katakana* words of obvious foreign origin, her texts also become exotic.²⁹⁾ The tough and rough African-American slang, along with sex-related language, and the frequent appearance of the "f" word from male and female characters, gives Yamada's texts a masculine feel, an edge, a crude sensibility that is very uncommon to women's writing in Japan. Yamada's heroines not only talk as foul-mouthed as any low life brute, they talk without restraint about sexual and other bodily parts and all the juicy details entailed in the sex act. It is this directness, this refusal to go under cover of any sort, in other words, a most unfeminine trait that defies her conventional aesthetic principle. This also forms a sharp contrast to the most popular woman writer in contemporary Japan, Banana Yoshimoto, whose female characters are far less aggressive and verbal.

The extremely unfeminine model of language preferred by Yamada's women characters serves as a self-protective weapon and an initial means to communicate as equals with the physically dominating male characters that they lust after. This can be seen as an aesthetic assault on traditional Japanese sensibilities in favor of subtleties and indirect emotional self-expression, a standard feminine aesthetic ideal since its insinuation in Lady Murasaki's time. Yamada's filthy-mouthed Tokyo women are the antithesis of feminine virtue revered by convention and patriarchal control. Moreover, Yamada's texts are overridden by a dispersing sexual-lingual energy that comes directly from the female body fully immersed in a sexual *jouissance* experience. It is in this aspect that Yamada subverts the oppressive phallogentric systems of representation of female desire. At the same time, however, Yamada's casual rejection of Japanese cultural identity is performed at the cost of displacing the African-American experience of racialism.

In conclusion, writing the female body from a gendered position in contemporary East Asian contexts proves to be a liberating as well as problematic endeavor. Many Asian women writers, such as Wei Hui and Amy Yamada, enjoy unprecedented freedom to explore issues that have been taboo and might still be in their cultures. Centering on feminine sexual discourse, Wei Hui and Yamada cultivate new narrative territories that carry fundamental subversive potential to challenge phallogentric

representation of women.

Through open, direct and brutally honest interrogations of their literary self—the female protagonist—they raise crucial questions regarding the essence and nature of female writing. By insisting on a gendered female subjective position, their narrative establishes an autonomous agency for their heroine. The narrative destabilizes gender formation and reveals difficulties in subverting the power structure sanctioned by the conventional mode of sexual experience and representation. Their female protagonist's psychosexual self-searching trajectory depends on a practice of objectification of the male other. This reverse othering ultimately becomes problematic and ironizes the discourse of sexualized femininity, which is the ultimate narrative concern of both writers. It remains to be seen what new features this female writing will assume in Asia amidst the current debate in the west over whether feminism has truly become something of the past.³⁰⁾ Will the female body cease to signify?

Notes

- 1) Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl eds., *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 348.
- 2) Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 348.
- 3) In her recent study Lynne Pearce offers in-depth discussion on the metaphor of the female body in women's writings of the past few decades. See *The Rhetorics of Feminism: Readings in Contemporary Cultural Theory and the Popular Press*, (London: Routledge, 2004). In particular, refer to the chapter "Thinking through the Body—or Not," 123–146.
- 4) Feminists have not come to a consensus as to what this *écriture féminine*, or female writing, should be like or do. Some even question if it is at all possible. For a condensed review of various ideas about this female writing, see the brief introduction to the "body" by Diane Price Herndl in Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl eds., *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 343–346.
- 5) Typically studies about women writers in China, Japan, and Korea will make some kind of connection with the "oppressive" ideas in tradition-honored Confucianism. A recent study on this topic, however, intends to offer a new perspective on women's roles in premodern East Asian societies in relation to Confucianism. Refer to Dorothy Ko, Jahyun Kim Haboush, and Joan R. Piggott eds., *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
- 6) I have chosen to only discuss works by Wei Hui and Yamada that have been translated into English. For detail: Wei Hui, *Shanghai Baby*, trans. Bruce Humes, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1999); Wei Hui, *Marrying Buddha*, trans. Larissa Heinrich, (London: Robinson, 2005); Amy Yamada, "Bedtime Eyes," "The Piano Player's Fingers," and "Jesse," *Bedtime Eyes*, trans. Yumi Gunji and Marc Jardine, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006); Amy Yamada, "When a Man Loves a Woman," Yukiko Tanaka ed., *Unmapped Territories: New Women's Fiction from Japan*, (Seattle: Women in Translation, 1991), 69–83; Amy Yamada, *Trash*, trans. Sonya L. Johnson, (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).
- 7) For a wonderful analysis of the female private literary discourse in the past couple decades in mainland China, see Bonnie S. McDougall, "Discourse on Privacy by Women Writers in Late Twentieth-Century China," *China Information*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2005), 97–119.
- 8) Some of the background information about this debate is given in Shuyu Kong, *Consuming Literature: Best Sellers and the Commercialization of Literary Production in Contemporary China*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 103–109.
- 9) Already at the end of 1995, the famous Chinese woman scholar Dai Jinhua warned how the publication of works by women writers at the time to welcome the so-called "year of women," 1995, provided the market an incredible opportunity to "rediscover" the old trick of "to be looked-at-ness." See

- Dai Jinhua and Wang Gan's discussion, "Nuxing Wenxue Yu Gerenhua Xiezu," *You Zai Jing Zhong: Dai Jinhua Fangtan Lu*, (Beijing: Zhishi Chubanshe, 1999), 191–211.
- 10) For information regarding *Shanghai Baby*'s publication and its ban shortly afterwards, as well as Wei Hui's self-promotion effort, see Shuyu Kong, *Consuming Literature: Best Sellers and the Commercialization of Literary Production in Contemporary China*, 109–119.
 - 11) Wei Hui's economic gain over the banning of her book comes, interestingly, largely from overseas, where it has made the bestseller list in several countries. Western media predictably magnifies Wei Hui's position as a victim under a conservative communist regime, reacting ridiculously according to a Cold War logic that anything forbidden by the Communist Party must be an ideological challenge, and therefore must be "good." They applauded unconditionally. See Shuyu Kong, *Consuming Literature: Best Sellers and the Commercialization of Literary Production in Contemporary China*, 109–119.
 - 12) A recent study of the emerging sex culture in Shanghai in the past few decades is found in James Farrer, *Opening Up: Youth Sex Culture and Market Reform in Shanghai*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002). Discussions on Wei Hui and *Shanghai Baby* are found sporadically in this book.
 - 13) In mainland China various types of writings, often not strictly academic, on the discourse of "beauty writers" can be found. A typical example is Shao Yanjun, *"Meinu Wenxue" Xianxiang Yanjiu*, (Guilin: Guangxi Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, 2005).
 - 14) For information on how Yamada's works were received in the late 1980s, see Chieko I. Mulhern ed., *Japanese Women Writers: A Bio-critical Sourcebook*, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994), 457–480. This paper uses the version of the novella "Bedtime Eyes" as it appears in the collection of Yamada's novellas under the title *Bedtime Eyes*. See Yumi Gunji and Marc Jardine trans., (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006).
 - 15) For background information on Setouchi and her story "The Stamen" refer to Jan Bardsley, "The Essential Woman Writer," Rebecca L. Copeland ed., *Woman Critiqued: Translated Essays on Japanese Women's Writing*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 53–60.
 - 16) The Woman's Decade refers to the late 1970s and 1980s. For studies about Japanese women writers of this time by Japanese scholars and writers, see Rebecca L. Copeland ed., *Woman Critiqued: Translated Essays on Japanese Women's Writing*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006).
 - 17) Upon receiving the prestigious Naoki Award for popular literature in 1987, Yamada made the casual comment in her acceptance speech: "Isn't this some kind of a mistake? I thought these [literary] award were given only to old writers." See Mulhern, *Japanese Women Writers: A Bio-critical Sourcebook*, 459.
 - 18) Writer Masahiko Shimada has expressed his admiration for Yamada's prose, for her inventive ways of using the Japanese language. See Sinda Gregory, Larry McCaffery and Yoshiaki Koshikawa, "Sophisticated Masochism: An Interview with Masahiko Shimada," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 22, no. 2 (2002).
 - 19) For one study on romance and women see, Jean Radford ed., *The Progress of Romance*, (London: Routledge, 1986).
 - 20) Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), 39. Among other topics, Felski discusses potentials as well as various conflicts and problematics embedded in the discourse of the "female writing."
 - 21) Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 39.
 - 22) This falls back to Luce Irigaray's argument that women's bodies have been made objects of exchange for men. See Luce Irigaray, "This Sex Which is not One," Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl eds., *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 363–369.
 - 23) Refer to *Marrying Buddha*, 211–219.
 - 24) This racism also coincides with a larger scale appropriation of the African-American male and female images as upholding a new standard of beauty in the fashion industry. At the same time, when Yamada writes to foreground and inscribe the male black body in her texts, black faces were the faces of many consumer products in Japan and the west. For a study on how the black figure is treated as the other in Japan, see John Russell, "Race and Reflexivity: the Black Other in Contemporary Japanese Mass Culture," *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 6, no. 1 (Feb., 1991), 3–25.

- 25) For a recent analysis on Yamada's discourse of gender and racial ideology, see Nina Cornyetz, "Power and Gender in the Narratives of Yamada Eimi," Paul Gordon Schalow and Janet A. Walker eds., *The Woman's Hand: Gender and Theory in Japanese Women's Writing*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 425–457. Although Cornyetz offers some discussion of "Bedtime Eyes," her main focus is on Yamada's novel *Harem*, of which no English-language version has been published.
- 26) This story resembles in theme and style to the chick lit popularized since the TV drama *Sex and the City* aired. Also, like the majority of chick lit stories, it is a pure fantasy.
- 27) Incidentally, the Chinese text of *Marrying Buddha* and the English translation differ in content. A few passages of explicit descriptions of a sex scene involving Coco, Muju, and a female prostitute are not in the Chinese version.
- 28) As pointed out by McDougall, Wei Hui and other young women writers in the "beauty writer" group, such as Mian Mian and Zhou Jieru, were promoted as a "Chinese equivalent of British and American 'chick lit.'" See McDougall, "Discourse on Privacy by Women Writers in Late Twentieth-Century China," 102. McDougall also states that a big difference lies in the western chick lit privacy is not an issue.
- 29) Incidentally, Yamada uses *katakana* word *bedtime* and *eyes* as her novella's title "Bedtime Eyes."
- 30) Feminists in the west have been engaged in discussion of the meaning of a post-feminism for some time now. In the popular media this term seems to refer to the sentiment that women are being fairly equally treated, they have power, they can choose to have free sex, have children or not, marry or not. What is the point of feminism any more? The tremendous popularity of chick lit novels such as *Bridget Jones' Diary* and television shows such as *Sex and the City* certainly implicate the complexities of this issue. This term is sometimes used similarly as "third wave feminism." For couple book length studies on related issues, see Imelda Whelehan, *The Feminist Bestseller: From Sex and the Single Girl to Sex and the City*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Stacy Gillis, Gillin Howie, and Rebecca Munford eds., *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).