

'I write with my body'

Opinion >
Deviance

Writing about sex under the motto 'I write with my body', several young women writers outrage China. The Chinese call them *xinxin renlei* – brand new humans.

By Yue Tao

The first 'new human' writer, Wei Hui, shocked the nation five years ago with *Shanghai Baby*. Another Shanghai girl, Mian Mian, followed suit with *Candy*. Three years ago, Jiu Dan described her own work as 'prostitute literature'. When Mu Zimei, a magazine journalist of twenty-five, published her intimate diaries online, China was rocked by scandal. Before the Mu Zimei phenomenon could subside, a university teacher released seminude photos of herself online under the pseudonym 'Bamboo Shadow Clear Pupil'. While Western media and some young Chinese celebrate these women writers as cultural freedom fighters, most Chinese abominate them.

Strictly soft-core

Why all the fuss? Is new human writing pornographic? Hardly. Compared with erotic novels written centuries ago, new human writing is strictly soft-core. *Jin Ping Mei* (Golden Lotus Vase), a Ming dynasty classic available in quality bookstores on the mainland, has hundreds of scenes that graphically portray sexual intercourse (hetero and homo), orgies, techniques, and accessories. Though new human writing is occasionally illustrated with seminude photos of the author, they are nothing like the frankly technical illustrations that often appear in traditional erotic literature.

Does celebrating sexual pleasure contradict Chinese values? On the contrary, traditional Chinese culture venerates sex. It views the sexes as complementary opposites like heaven and earth. When heaven and earth are in harmony, peace and fertility reign; when men and women are in harmony in bed, good health and children result. The Chinese euphemism for sex is 'spring' (connoting gentle, warm, pleasant and lively) as Chinese erotic art illustrates. Unlike Western erotic art, which exhibits tension and excitement, Chinese 'spring palace drawings' are playful and cheerful, even humorous.

Bad influence

If sex itself is not culpable, are people afraid that the new human decadence will corrupt society, especially the young? No. The Chinese public is too arrogant to fear moral corrup-

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tion. Anyway, the new humans write only about their exclusive social circle – rock and roll musicians, postmodern poets, avant-garde painters, entertainment journalists and fun-seeking foreigners – a tiny minority whose lifestyle is outside the mainstream. As for bad influence, Chinese classics are more



Paint on silk 32 x 33 cm

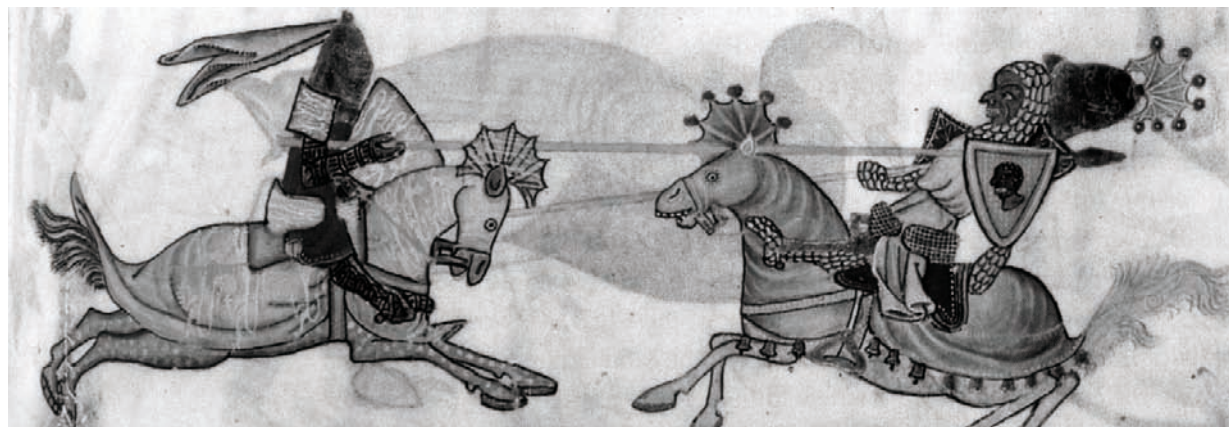
From the Bertholet Collection. Dreams of Spring: Erotic art in China. Amsterdam: Pepin Press (1998)

Opinion

The Collapse of the Global Conversation

Opinion >
World politics

The world after 11 September 2001 has seemed a bewildering place – as if all liberal notions of universal reason, freedom, tolerance and the rule of law have been proven a lie overnight.



King Richard I and Saladin

By Subroto Roy

We can start with the observable fact that there is and has been only one human species, no matter how infinitely diverse its specimens across space and time. All have a capacity to reason as well as a capacity to feel a range of emotions. And every human society, in trying to ascertain what is good for itself, finds need to reason together about how its members may best survive, grow, reproduce and flourish. This process of common reasoning and reflection requires freedom of inquiry and expression of different points of view. The lone voice in dissent needs to be heard, at least not suppressed in case it is the right voice

counselling against a course that may lead to catastrophe for all. To reason together implies a true or right answer exists to be found; truth seeking requires freedom as its logical corollary.

'the crimes of September 11 2001 were ones of political protest. But they were not something inexplicable or sui generis. They represented a final collapse of the centuries-old cosmopolitan conversation with Islam'

With the enormous growth of science, some scientists have gone to the limit of declaring no religious belief can possibly survive. In fact the ultra-scientific prejudice fails ultimately to be reasonable enough, and is open to a joint and decisive counter-attack by both the religious believer and the artist.

Asia's modern dilemmas

Broadly speaking, throughout the vast span of Asia over the last two hundred years, there has been admiration for the contribution of the modern West to the growth of scientific knowl-

edge. Where it has come to be known and applied, there has been admiration for liberal Western political thought as well. Concurrently, Asian nationalists in the 20th century strug-

gled to establish autonomous national identities. Asian nationalism represented an unwillingness to be treated as mere means towards the ends of Western nations, something we still see today.

In earlier times, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr and Nelson Mandela led successful non-violent political protests of non-white peoples against white organized authorities. Their protests assumed a level of tolerance arising out of mutual respect between rebel and authority. None was a totalitarian revolutionary out to destroy his adversary; each wanted to

preserve and nurture aspects of the existing order. Each first became the master of the political idiom of his adversary, willing and able to employ this idiom to demonstrate the self-contradiction of his opponent, who was typically faced with a charge of hypocrisy, of maintaining both x and its contrary.

Suicide, terrorism and political protest

Suicide as political protest abides by the Socratic injunction that it is better to suffer wrong than to wrong others.¹ Terrorism by suicide crosses that line – over into a world of utilitarian calculation by the perpetrator that his or her suicide is inadequate, and must be accompanied by death among one's adversary.

The perpetrators of September 11 subjectively acted in the name of Islam. Words are also deeds while deeds may also convey meaning.² The words and deeds of the perpetrators, and of the nations organized against them since then, are components of a complex and subtle global conversation taking place as to the direction of our common future.

Political conversations require time and patience; the movements of Gandhi, King and Mandela each took decades to reach fruition. In the post 11 September world, tolerance has vanished, replaced by panic, mutual fear and hatred. Violence appears as the first, not last recourse of political discussion. The world after 11 September has become a bewildering place – as if all liberal notions of universal reason, freedom, tolerance and the rule of law since the Enlightenment have been proven a lie overnight, deserving only to be flushed away in face of resurgent ancient savageries.

Be this as it may, common reasoning

John L. Esposito, ed. *The Oxford History of Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (1999)

This is an editorially abridged version of a keynote address given to the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats in Manila, Philippines on November 16 2001. The full version 'A General Theory of Globalisation and Modern Terrorism with Special Reference to September 11' may be found in Uwe Johannsen, Alan Smith, James Gomez, eds. (2002) *Post September 11: Political Freedom in Asia*, Singapore: CALD, and at: <http://www.buckingham.ac.uk/publicity/academics/articles/roy-sept11.pdf>

dangerous. *Water Margin* is a saga of violence and secret societies; *Three Kingdoms* is about political intrigue; *Dream of the Red Chamber* concerns the vanity of life. No one knows how many teenagers form gangs inspired by *Water Margin*, how many adults play dirty tricks learned from *Three Kingdoms*, or how many *Dream of the Red Chamber* readers adopt its nihilistic worldview. If moral implications got books banned in China, the classics would be suppressed.

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Since new human writing is neither pornographic nor dangerous, why does it upset so many people? In public criticisms on the web, the most frequent accusation is that new human writers are 'irresponsible'. They expose the details of their promiscuous sex life without considering how other people feel. There is a tacit, pragmatic rule in Chinese society: indecent behavior, including extramarital sex, can be tolerated as long as it does not embarrass anyone. Traditional erotic novels and art were always bedside reading or brothel decoration. Though publicly accessible now, they are too archaic to agitate people. New human writing, by contrast, is a twenty-first century sensation that travels the internet to reach tens of millions of readers – teenagers as well as adults – within seconds.

New human writers are like exhibitionists. Meeting them, people are shocked and embarrassed. 'Just reading you, I feel ashamed for you', many critics say. Chinese culture is a shame culture; Chinese morality depends on shame. Noth-

ing feels worse than being ashamed, but nothing liberates more than indifference. 'I already lost face; what more can I lose?' Losing face, new humans liberate body and pen. They consider liberation the greatest artistic achievement of all: 'It is my way of life. If I stop, I am not myself any more.' They quote Western feminist slogans to show how enlightened they are – avant-garde performing artists seeking individual freedom and female liberation. They are above the multitude still trapped in Confucian morality.

New human irresponsibility irritates the Chinese, and its self-righteousness outrages them. Irritation and outrage notwithstanding, they accept new human writing as a fact of life. The government bans new human books, shuts down websites, and dismisses authors from their jobs, but

new humans sprout like mushrooms. Public curiosity and vehement reaction provoke them. Without the attention, new human writers would enjoy neither celebrity nor scandal. They would be invisible, which they hate most. It seems Western pollution is real – it not only spawns a group indifferent to face, but lowers Chinese eroticism from art to manifesto. <

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still has its place: in identifying deep, long-term historical factors that may have accumulated to cause such a crime. One factor has been techno-economic: the invention of the internal combustion engine, coupled with the discovery of petroleum beneath the sands of Arabia, which made the material prosperity of the modern West depend on access to oil.

and rule has continued in more subtle diplomatic forms: championing post-Mossadeq Iran against any incipient Arab nationalism, then Iraq against post-Revolutionary Iran, then against Iraq in the Gulf War of 1991. It is only during and after the Gulf War that Osama Bin Laden, as a totalitarian revolutionary, arose as an adversary of the West.

What September 11 has demonstrated is that even while the information we have about one another and ourselves has increased exponentially in recent years, our mutual comprehension of one another and ourselves may well have grossly deteriorated in quality.

Reversing such atrophy in our self-knowledge and mutual comprehension requires, in the opinion of the present author, the encouragement of all societies of all sizes to flourish in their scientific knowledge, their religious and philosophical consciousness and self-

discovery, and their artistic expressiveness under conditions of freedom. <

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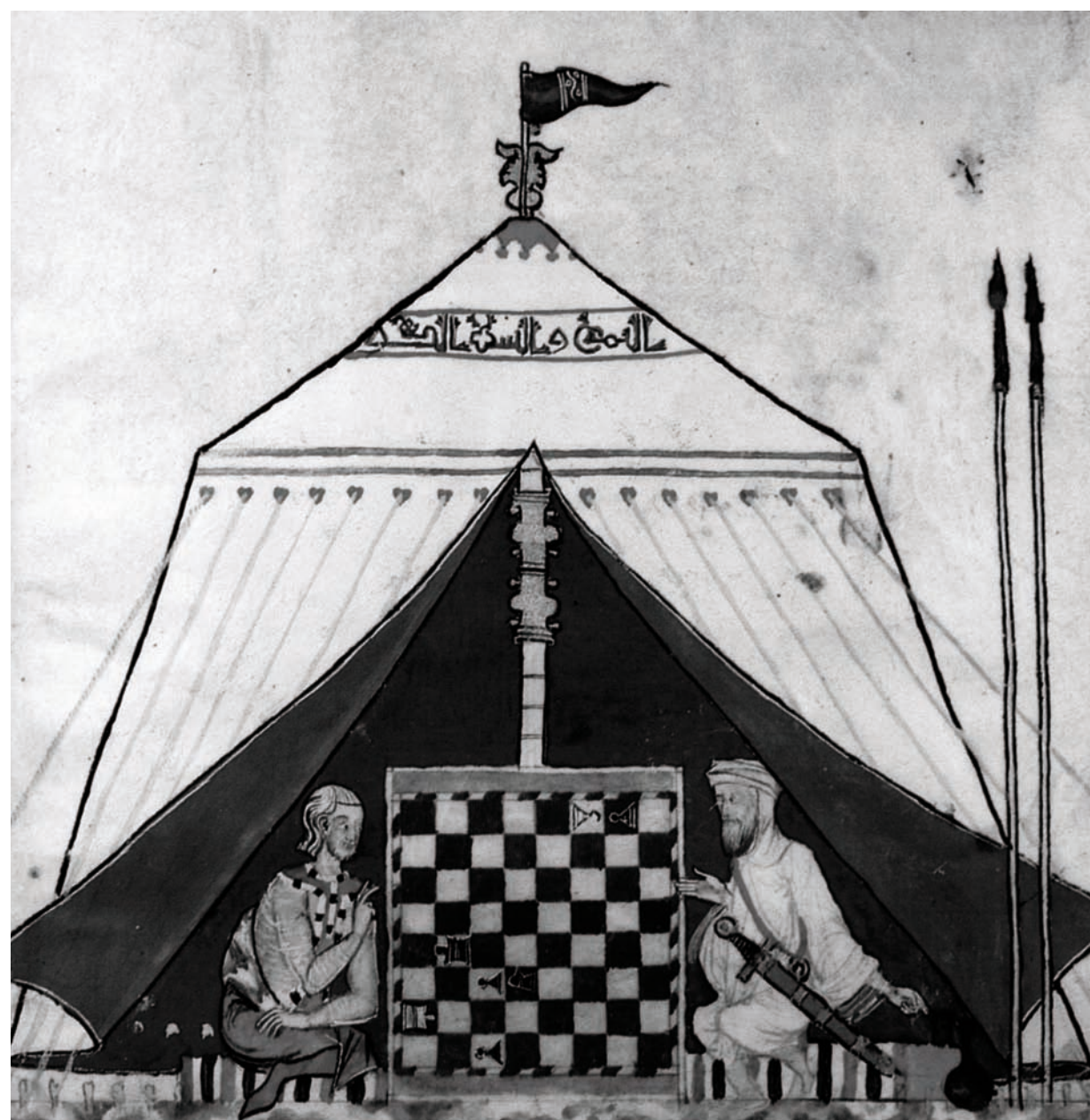
'Asian nationalism represented an unwillingness to be treated as mere means towards the ends of Western nations, something we still see today'

A second and independent factor has been the history of Christian Europe's alternating persecution and emancipation of the Jewish people, which led in due course to the Balfour declaration of 1917 and, following the Nazi Holocaust, to the creation of modern Israel among the Arabic-speaking peoples.

The history between Christianity and Judaism is one in which the Arabic-speaking peoples were passive bystanders. Indeed, they may have been passive bystanders in the creation of their own states as well – for a third factor must be the lack of robust development of modern political and economic institutions, mechanisms of political expression and accountability in the Middle East. Beginning with the Allied-induced Arab revolt against the Turks, the classic imperial doctrine of divide

Through these developments, political conversation among the Arabic-speaking peoples remained stifled; whatever current it had turned inward to the austere roots of a desert faith. But this attempt to return inevitably became something reactionary in the late 20th century. Finding the Beduin and the deserts of Arabia transformed over the intervening decades, it could only try to recreate itself among the Pashtoon in the barrenness of Afghanistan, and led to the bizarre scenes of the Taliban attempting to destroy televisions and cassette-tapes in the name of Islam.

The crimes of September 11 2001 were ones of political protest. But they were not something inexplicable or *sui generis*. They represented a final collapse of the centuries-old cosmopolitan conversation with Islam.



Notes >

- 1 Plato Gorgias 474b, 483a,b
Hannah Arendt (1971) *The Life of the Mind, Thinking*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 181-182
- 2 This was emphasized by the late Cambridge philosopher Renford Bambrough (1980) 'Thought, word and deed' in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supp. Vol. LIV, 105-117