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Commodification of the Female Self

In the 1990s, writing about private life and the self became a cultural phenomenon in China. From this boom emerged a wave of “private writers” - referred to as yinsi (隐私) - meaning “privacy” or “the hidden self.” Originally, this writing encompassed a wide range of personal and introspective topics. Over time, however, “the content of privacy was reduced to female sexuality, and other privacy experiences were neglected or ignored. Privacy became a commodity to be traded like any other, with the additional attraction of celebrity as well as financial gain” (McDougall 111). In *A Private Life*, Chen Ran explores the commodification of female identity, showing how private writing becomes both a tool for self-liberation and a site of inevitable exploitation, exposing the psychological and cultural contradictions of contemporary life.

The commodification of female bodies in Chinese culture can be traced through Confucianism ideals spanning more than two millennia. From the very beginning of her life, a girl was made aware of a woman's place in the home through a culture of seclusion and suppression (Gao 7). In his article, “Women Existing for Men: Confucianism and Social Injustice Against Women in China,” Gao argues that prejudice against women has a deeply rooted history in Chinese social structures. In his critique he ties Confucianism, a school of thought upheld by nearly every feudal dynasty and later by the nationalist government from 200 BCE to 1949, to the possession and ownership of women. In particular, the institution of marriage was a system of bondage in which women would become the property of men as they were married off by their families. He explains, “women had no place at all in society... a woman's place was confined to home [and] once married she would be referred to by her husband and others as nèi rén [内人], a

euphemism for wife, which literally means ‘inside person’,” (Gao 6). Furthermore, women were acknowledged for the sole purpose of reproduction. As possessions, women were expected to bear sons to carry on the family name, and if a woman failed to produce a son for the family she was regarded to have committed the worst moral crime. Seen as worthless, the woman would be shunned by the family and even driven to suicide. In his article, “The commoditization of Chinese women” Gates explains how this societal standard for women was in reality a means of blatant commodification. He writes, “Young women held commercial value as childbearers and domestic laborers, legally regarded as property first of their birth families and then of their husbands’ families.” Deeply imbued in the culture and practices of relationships, Confucian ideology taught that a woman's body was not her own and that her voice should not be heard (McDougall 97). In other words, women were objects of male ownership, and not themselves free agents.

With the rise of economic reforms and cultural shifts, particularly in the 1990s, women gained greater access to legal rights and personal expression. This period saw a boom of autobiographical and confessional writing, especially by women, as a means of resistance to domestic and cultural entrapment. In her piece, “Discourse on Privacy by Women Writers in Late Twentieth-Century China,” McDougall discusses the new narrative of privacy in women’s literature and explores how sexuality became a major aspect of the dialog. McDougall notes, “In the 1990s, writing about private life became associated with fiction and journalism by women, and privacy became publishers’ shorthand for sexual revelations.” (McDougall 97). Ran Chen’s novel, *A Private Life*, published in 1996 was a landmark novel in this wave of yinsi(隐私) feminist literature. Chen provided an unorthodox exploration of female subjectivity, centering on a young woman, Niuniu’s, inner life, sexuality, and alienation. As the dust jacket put it, the novel

is the “riveting tale of a young woman’s emotional and sexual awakening.” (Schaffer, 5). Not only did the novel provide a sensual expression of Niuniu’s female desire, it also dealt with pain that she faced traumatised by unspeakable oppressions. For example, Chen works through the grief and injustice Niuniu feels when faced with sudden death of her neighbor and intimate friend Mrs. Ho. Additionally, Chen writes about the fear and anger felt by Niuniu as a result of the rape and predation by her school teacher Ti. Through the narrative, Chen candidly acknowledges Niuniu’s experience, psychology, and her intense emotions of passion and disillusionment resulting from her trauma. As Niuniu slips away from sanity, Chen writes, “What’s your name? My name’s Ni; I look like I’m one person, but actually I’m several. Familiar place. One foot running off in different directions. An ear in a flower garden listening, a knocking sound. My one true love. Psychosomatic amnesia. Everywhere.” (Chen 188). Although Niuniu’s narrative is fragmented and isolated, her unrestrained indulgence in her psyche and sexual fantasies allow her to work through various types of gendered physical pain. Niuniu’s self goes through cycles of deconstruction and reconstruction throughout the novel - meeting her wounds head on and healing her wounds through self-indulgence and imagination. Zhan’s analysis in her publication, “The Ambiguity of Pain Self, Fragments and Female Connection in Chen Ran’s *A Private Life*” puts it perfectly. Zhan writes, “Pain becomes a vehicle for the realisation, exploration and construction of who they are, as well as a push-back against social norms and discipline” (Zhan 82). Through a deep exploration of sexuality and psyche, Chen’s writing becomes an example of autonomy of the self and liberation of cultural and domestic confinement.

However, in their struggle to gain autonomy, yinsi writers faced pressure from the market to sell and exploit their private experiences. The expression of the private self was linked to the

market, and in this way, privacy became a commodity to be traded like any other. McDougall notes, "The content of privacy was reduced to female sexuality, and other privacy experiences were neglected or ignored... The celebrated author is only famous if her privacy is repeatedly violated: by herself and by her readers." (McDougall 111). In a culture imbued with deep patriarchal roots, private writing practically presents itself as a contemporary replication of the commodification of women seen in the centuries preceding it. Gates argued that through economic manipulation of women's labor and personal autonomy, women had been forced to yield resources that became property controlled by men. In this case, commodification of women's autobiographical experience is the labor, and the lucrative market for private writing is the resource controlled by men. Gates further explores how this institution evaluates private writing when he explains, "Whether this property could be considered capital depended on the presence and development of markets in which a woman's person, labor, and products could be profitably exchanged." (Gates 814). Clearly, a paradox of autonomy and objectification exists in the markets for yinsi writing. The price of female autonomy is both visibility and vulnerability. Undoubtedly, visibility by the market ensures that women's voices will urgently be heard. For yinsi authors, writing becomes a way to liberate the self truthfully and gain autonomy. As a result, however, yinsi writers risk exposure to exploitation, objectification, and the pressure to write purely for the consumption of the market. The willing act of commodifying the female sexual experience for the public market is frightening when taken to extremes, yet the institution persists because it is profitable. This is an issue because, as Gate puts it, "Money makes no choices, has no intentions, says nothing." (Gates 799). When visibility turns to objectification, and voices become commodities, the individual is rendered invisible once again. Thus, the cycle of oppression quietly reinforces itself, masked as empowerment.

Even though self commoditization is self-oppression, it is not likely that self-commoditization will stop anytime soon. In her piece, “Personal matters: women's autobiographical practice in twentieth-century China”, Wang links self-commoditization or self-consumption to the practice of modern hedonism. Modern hedonism is a pursuit of satisfaction and pleasure for one’s own sake and this hedonism is what drives individuals to use their imaginative powers to construct self-narratives. For the reader, autobiographical literature can then fulfill an emotional desire, a creation which will be modified by reader self-consumption (Wang 174). Wang notes, the mirror most vividly illustrates the logic of modern hedonism because it provides an illusion of the self that one is able to consume, reimagine, and fantasize. (Wang 180). It is also a metaphor for the current cultural landscape of the decade,

‘jingcheng’ (a city of mirrors), full of unpredictable, conflicting cultural images/traps/realities and self-willed, imaginary self-identities. The meanings of things are no longer singular and certain but multiple and contradictory; everything has lost its origin and turned into images and spectacles, reflected and reflected through layers of mirrors and reproducing itself endlessly. (Wang 169)

This evaluation of society echoes Niuniu’s mind as she reaches the end of the novel. Chen writes,

The things that followed have distorted my memory, or perhaps I should say that my memory has distorted the things that followed. At any rate, those days were a confused labyrinth of tangled knots, mirrors within mirrors, paintings within paintings, through which time wove its way. This terrible time left me feeling like everything was upside down, backwards. (Chen 193)

The unpredictability of these reflections and their meanings shows us one thing, in this world nothing feels real or evidence based. Reproducing itself endlessly is quite poignant because the more we try to revisit our memories, the more distorted they become. Instead of building upon life - Niuniu is stuck in a cycle of trying to recreate herself in her head rather than in the world. The reader may be able to restore what is damaged through self-consumption; these brief respites, however, are no more than palliatives in a repressive society. (McDougall 10)

This practice of recreation and self-commodification is prevalent in today's world as sharing becomes frictionless through the digital world. Social media, as Zuckerberg puts it, is "a new way to express who you are." (Payne 88). In his study, "Frictionless Sharing and Digital Promiscuity" Payne argues that the structure of performativity and reward encourages users to share and repost personal information in order to "become successful subjects." (Payne 88). The arbiters of this personal information, Facebook or Google for example, capitalize on this free labor by monetizing individuals personal information. This has major implications for autonomy because, Payne describes, "By learning to immaterial labour, the user becomes and aims to stay legible as subject to the norms of sharing. The social network user who ceases to share ceases to be." (Payne 89). Our privacy is an attribute of political and financial power, and should be valued as such, especially for women who have long been deprived of it. As Gao states, "Her power lies solely behind the doors;" (Gao 5).

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