
Xin Yang’s From Beauty Fear to Beauty Fever: A Critical Study of Contemporary Chinese Female Writers takes an interdisciplinary approach to look into one compelling aspect of contemporary Chinese ideology, namely “beauty fever,” a phenomenon that centers around the mass consumption of both “beauty” (female writers) and “writing” (texts) at the turn of the twenty-first century. Marketed and codified as writers-cum-beauties, the “beauty writers” (meinü zuojia), women born in the 1970s, constitute an interesting social as well as literary spectacle. This book, a study that falls between cultural studies and studies on women’s writing, is a selective examination of some of the writings of the “beauty writers.” It seeks to scrutinize their literary features and contributions in relation to time and scene, and also attempts to unfold how both the female writers’ desire for self-expression and the dynamism of the urban, global market help give form to such a spectacle.

To approach this phenomenon, Yang does not limit herself to mere textual analysis, but demonstrates well her broad vision of cultural studies in cross-examinations of texts and social statistics, and constant cross-references to Western feminist theories. Aside from her attention to broadness, she also places this topic of “beauty fever” in a linear historical timeline. Linking “beauty fever” to “beauty fear” in the revolutionary era and even to the female writers and their writings in the 1930s, Yang underscores the intriguing fact that turn-of-the-twenty-first-century “beauty fever” is by no means an isolated cultural phenomenon. On the contrary, it is connected to previous ideologies and its roots may date back to the Republican era.

The book’s five chapters are structured according to five selected perspectives, reflecting “different aspects of the social and cultural scenarios at the turn of the century” (p.11): historical image, youthful time, literary space, alternative writing, and body narrative. Chapter One, the background chapter, reviews the changing historical trends and discourses that have coded “feminine beauty” and “female writers” in contemporary China: from something of a repressed invisibility in the revolutionary era, to a sub-group...
subsumed under the “born-in-the-70s writer” category in the post-revolutionary period, to an independent group coming out glamorously as the hyper-visible “beauty writers” (meinü zuojia). Yang attributes this striking outshining of female writers over their male contemporaries to the combined effects of both the long-term repression of feminine beauty in the revolutionary era and the active, newly emergent energy of commercialization and consumption in the post-revolutionary period. She especially elaborates on how the media, the cultural market and the literary arena conspired to (re)construct femininity and cash in on the high-profile beauty-ness.

Chapters Two and Three are structured around the issues of time and space, respectively. As insightfully observed by Yang in Chapter Two, the labeling of the born-in-the-70s female writers signifies an intriguing shift of critical attention from shared textual motifs (like the categorization and naming of “scar literature,” “root searching,” or the “avant-garde”) to the age of the writers and the theme of time. Time, viewed literally and figuratively, is not only treated as the marker of a unique generation, but also as the very catalyst that stimulates the thinking and writing on youth. The newly-fashioned youthfulness is examined here through writer Mian Mian, who not only embodies the uneasiness of the lives of the youth in metropolitan China, but also creates an impressively cool and cruel youth subculture in her famous novel Candy (Tang). Yang shows how the theme of “illness and youth” serves multiple ends in Mian Mian’s writing. It catches the pain and decadence of the marginal youngsters, and represents the anarchistic characteristics of the new youth by defying the grand narrative of the morning-sun youth in Maoist discourses (“The morning sun metaphor was employed by Mao Zedong to eulogize the vigorous youth of the new generation.” p.29), and even harks back to the May Fourth literary tradition in terms of its writing medical and clinical discourses back into text (Yang thinks Mian Mian’s writing has picked up the clinical function of writing practiced by the May Fourth writers, but is done in a different manner and within a changing social context.). Rebellious as Mian Mian initially was, like her characters in Candy, she maintains a paradoxical relationship with the mainstream. The unconventional youth status is only ephemeral, as Yang laments.

Besides the refuguration of youthfulness and the reframing of time, the beauty writers are also revolutionary in space exploration, as discussed in Chapter Three. Shaped
by the increasing number of urban fantasies about xiaozi (petit bourgeoisie) and the development of high technology, the female writers also succeed in carving out for themselves cyberspace as an alternative media and an easy escape. Using the examples of Zhou Jieru and Anni Baobei with statistical support from various socio-cultural data, Chapter Three provides a rather informative narration of the effects of xiaozi imaginations on both cyber-writings (cyber-writings, according to Yang, are writings that are directly and originally written for and publicized on the Internet) and writings about cyberspace, as well as the dialectical interplay between the urban and cyberspace.

Chapters Four and Five turn to two well-known and highly controversial figures and their writings: Wei Hui and Muzi Mei. Divorced from many critics’ readings of Wei Hui’s Shanghai Baby as a national allegory or a symbol of colonial slavery, Yang returns the novel to female desire, personal fantasy, and self-indulgence in the era of post-modern consumerism. And through an intertextual reading of Wei Hui’s three novels (Crazy Like Wei Hui, Shanghai Baby, Pistol of Desire, all featuring “a girl’s becoming of a writer” formula), Chapter Four also demonstrates how Wei Hui actively engages in the process of self-commodification to promote her novels in the market. As a result, she turns herself and her fictional characters into appealing writers-cum-stars. The issue of female desire is continued in Chapter Five. By reading Muzi Mei, another demonized pleasure-seeker, and intelligently drawing from Western feminist theories, Yang stresses the positive power of body writing itself as a means of women’s self-expression and transgressing paternalistic traps. “Body writing” in Helene Cixous’s original theoretical framework is a political agenda, centering on women’s resistance to male-centered ideology. In contrast, shenti xiezuo (“body writing” in Chinese) was first a form of opposition against rationality (lixing) through the expression of subjective experience and intuition, and then a sexualized, very voyeuristically-charged concept shaped by the forces of the market. From page 71 to page 81, Yang reviews in admirable detail these different manifestations of “body writing” in various cultural and political discourses. To her, the “body narrative” of the female writers is highly tempting, because it shows a convergence of all the feminist, intellectual, and commercial messages of body writing.

This book would appeal to those interested in studies on the literary and cultural discourses of contemporary China. The only quibble with it may have to do with the
imbalance between “beauty fear” and “beauty fever.” Although the two concepts appear in the title, the book is actually almost exclusively on “beauty fever”, with “beauty fear” only occupying about two pages (pp. 15-17). It would have been better if the author could have adjusted the title a little to reflect the content. For readers interested in knowing more about “beauty fear,” it may be helpful to read Rosemary Roberts’ studies on the revolutionary model works.¹ These would also provide an overview of the arguments and counter-arguments concerning the gender ideology of the revolutionary era.

(Shu Yang, University of Oregon)