

## ISSUE NO. 5

# "Weird" Sex: Identity, Censorship, and China's Women Sex Bloggers

**Lindsey O'Connor**

From *American Idol* style talent competitions to Chinese *Vogue*, the recent influx of digital culture in urban China has irrevocably changed the country's social landscape. By 2000, Chinese urbanites could watch state-censored western television through online pirating, and *Sex and the City* became one of the most popular shows in the country signifying a growing interest in sexual politics and personal autonomy (Farrer 2007, p.5). Though restricted by the Chinese Communist Party, this new access to global culture via cyberspace promoted a dialogue about sexual rights, and due to the leveling nature of the Internet, the historic gap between political and unofficial voices began to wane (Farrer, p. 5). Central to the arguments in this article are Mu Zimei, Furong Jiejie, and Mu Mu, three Chinese sex bloggers who use their bodies as media to communicate a confrontation with and subversion of social control.<sup>[1]</sup> These women, perhaps the three most well-known sex bloggers to emerge on the Chinese Internet in terms of website hits and international media attention, use a manufactured combination of first-person texts and enigmatic self-portraits to strategically complicate normative notions of female sexuality.

Mu Zimei, Furong Jiejie, and Mu Mu blogged independently in China, but their widely popular personal websites quickly garnered the attention of major national and international media outlets including the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*, and their blogging identities and/or public high jinks became the subject of numerous academic inquiries. While these women and their blogs are frequently discussed in pop culture and academia in relation to Chinese sexual politics, celebrity in China, and the dialogic role of the Internet, I believe that the images manufactured to accompany these blogs have received insufficient examination. Additionally, as all of the women's original blogs are now defunct, the images that they created are among the only lasting remnants of their sites. Therefore, this essay aims to reattribute social and political gravity to these women and their controversial, exhibitionist modes of self-representation. Throughout this analysis, I explore the highly calculated motivations of Chinese women sex bloggers and examine how their use of suggestive material offers a threat to the dominant Communist discourse. Through consideration of the tenuous relationship between masculine hegemony and feminine sexuality, I will discuss the Chinese female body as a threatening site of gender construction that has been historically molded and validated by voices that speak on its behalf. Additionally, by

examining Chinese censorship and traditional Confucian gender roles, I will argue that China's sex bloggers are utilizing their bodies and highlighting their sexuality in a performance ultimately bent on both subverting repressive order and broadening conceptions of appropriate female sexuality.

Though the Chinese government encourages Internet usage, the information available via cyberspace is heavily censored – siphoned through sophisticated firewalls that block divisive buzzwords and blacklisted websites. This stringent new version of Chinese censorship of online pornography and politically sensitive material has been coined the Great Firewall of China. Companies such as Google and Yahoo have altered their search engine results to eliminate websites, blogs, and news updates pertaining to subjects that the Communist Party finds threatening. Indeed, searches for words like Tibet, democracy, Falun Gong, and Tiananmen Square Massacre yield results that cater to Communist Chinese ideology, creating a distorted lens through which Chinese netizens view the political climate of China and the world (Thompson 2006). However, while internationally popular networking and entertainment websites like YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook remain blocked in China, Chinese versions like Tudou, YouTube's counterpart, evade government blacklists through self-censorship. In fact, the Internet Society of China honors particularly prudent service providers with Self-Discipline Awards, a distinction indicating excellence in self-censorship (p. 6). The result is a highly filtered and narrow version of the Internet, a hollowed signifier that Big Brother is always watching.

While online pornography is certainly censored, some suggestive material exists on DIY soft porn websites that pose as blogs. For example, Sexywife.com is a Hong Kong based website aimed at swinging couples and a blogging venue for them to publicize their orgiastic trysts and fantasies. Photographs and homemade videos accompany the sometimes-graphic accounts of pure hedonism creating murky narratives that blend fact and fiction. However, as the URL "Sexywife" suggests, the blog is mainly an opportunity for men to gloat over the sexual desirability of their partners who remain absent from the dialogue (Jacobs 2010, p.10). Indeed, feminist film theorist Teresa De Lauretis claims that the paradoxical nature of woman as passive object, spoken of while remaining silent, "displayed as spectacle and yet unrepresented," is a prevalent theme for deconstruction throughout third-wave feminist thought (de Lauretis 1989, p.26). Without question, it is this idea of subverting the active man, passive woman dichotomy that foregrounds the sudden surge in popularity of women sex bloggers during the early 2000s. As the Internet became increasingly popularized as a conduit

for sexual expression, women began to take charge, mediating both the discussion and depiction of their own bodies.

While blogs like *Sexywife* promoted a predominately masculinist dialogue, in 2003 blogger Mu Zimei began posting stories describing her numerous love affairs in explicit detail.<sup>[2]</sup> After writing about a particularly unfulfilling one night stand with a Chinese rock star, his name included in her account, Mu Zimei became an overnight sensation, her blog scoring more than 20 million hits per day during the height of its popularity (Pomfret 2003). Flooded with attention from the mainstream media, Mu Zimei notoriously challenged a reporter, proposing that they sleep together and "the longer the sex, the longer the interview" (Yu Fan). Similarly, a major theme throughout Mu Zimei's writing is the possibility for lust and sex without love or commitment.

Mu Zimei's blog was met with criticism from conservative readers but hailed as a beacon for sexual revolution by many young readers searching for a platform to discuss sexual politics. Offended journalists as well as online readers pinned Mu Zimei as a metonym for the degradation of Chinese moral fiber and the lack of human decency and values (Farrer 2007, p. 26). The controversy over the explicit nature of Mu Zimei's blog and the public discourse that ensued was termed the "Mu Zimei Phenomenon." However, the discussion was tempered when her blog was removed from BlogChina.com after government officials became wary of the borderline obscene content that resulted in unprecedented traffic (p. 19). Furthermore, the Ministry of Propaganda banned the publication of Mu Zimei's book, a compilation of her blog postings that had already been published in France, an act of censorship that violated China's constitutional commitment to freedom of speech (p. 10). However, government attempts at censorship were too late; Mu Zimei had already become an icon for Chinese sexual liberation and a bastion for free speech.

In the wake of the Mu Zimei phenomenon, a number of other young female bloggers began to surface, their commonality resting in their exhibitionist tendencies and frank claims for self-satisfaction. Next in line to find celebrity through cyberspace was Furong Jiejie, her pseudonym literally translating to Older Sister Hibiscus, who became an overnight Internet celebrity in 2005. After suffering rejection from Beijing's top two universities, she sought revenge by posting self-portraits with accompanying text on the university's public bulletin boards. One image shows Furong Jiejie bending backwards, knees bent and body draped over a concrete ball. She rounds her back to accentuate her jutting breasts and expose her stomach, and her head and neck are thrust back in

an attempt to mold her body around the sphere, thus showcasing her flexibility. Furthermore, Furong Jiejie's expressive hands foreshadow her self-proclamations as a dance expert, a claim to an ability to control and manipulate her body on command. Such images are accompanied with text through which Furong Jiejie bluntly declares her outstanding intelligence and beauty, "D-cup breasts, round bottom, a 50-cm slim waist and weight under 45 kilograms. Wherever I go, I soon become the focus of the crowd" ("Ego Pays Off" 2006).



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/OConnorFig1.jpg>)

*Fig. 1. Furong Jiejie*

pose" by arching her back in an attempt to highlight her curves claiming, "I have a physique that gives men nosebleeds" (Eimer 2005). Again, Furong Jiejie seems to reference dance through her frozen pose, and in conjunction with her commanding expression, the image crystallizes her come-hither attitude.

Though Furong Jiejie became one of the most searched for names on the Chinese Internet, her antics were largely criticized, often on the basis that she was not traditionally attractive. Accusations that she paired delusions of grandeur with plain looks branded Furong Jiejie as a press monger, but still a curious



Sister Hibiscus quickly gained notoriety throughout Beijing campuses, and though the commotion caused by her images resulted in the privatization of university bulletin boards, she continued posting suggestive photographs and self-aggrandizing prose via her personal blog. One image shows Furong Jiejie photographed in a garden, fitting considering her pseudonym. She wears a sheer floral top, her black bra visible beneath the flowing fabric, and strikes her signature "S-

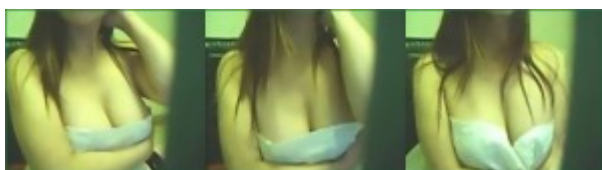
object of sexual interest. Like Mu Zimei, Furong Jiejie's blog was moved to a lower profile part of the BlogChina website due to

(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/OConnorFig2.jpg>)

*Fig. 2. Furong Jiejie*

government intervention, and Furong Jiejie-related chatrooms and photographs became much less accessible. The blogger publicly responded to the attack claiming, "When I first heard about it I was really disappointed ... My friends all said that the government should be encouraging a positive, helpful girl like me" ("China Tries to Wipe..." 2005). However, despite government attempts to thwart Furong Jiejie's popularity, she still remains visible through self-promotional videos, public appearances, and publicity stunts nearly a decade after her initial Internet debut.<sup>[3]</sup>

Finally, blogger Mu Mu followed suit becoming an Internet sensation after claiming, "I am a dance girl, and I am a party member. ... I am definitely the dance babe who reads the most and thinks the deepest, and I'm most likely the only Party member among them" (French 2005). Indeed, Mu Mu's self-proclaimed Communist Party affiliation was further sensationalized by her frequent image postings. Framing her eroticized body without ever exposing her face, Mu Mu's provocative poses lend to the air of mystery surrounding her identity. Photographs posted on her popular website depict the blogger's decapitated body as she coyly covers her bare breasts with fabric. By revealing her body and shielding her face, Mu Mu could become a fetish object, a body detached from identity, but on the contrary, she establishes a firm, though tongue-in-cheek tone in her writing. Mu Mu's witty and ironic commentary deals with sex and politics, though not in an overt way like Mu Zimei. Instead, her cool witticisms contribute to her paradoxical nature as a sexy fringe blogger and Communist Party advocate. A difficult case for Chinese censors, Mu Mu exposes herself as a Westernized dance girl but claims to fall in line with Communist ideology. In fact, after a boom in popularity and media attention, Mu Mu discontinued her blog, perhaps as an act of self-censorship (Bowen 2007).



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/OConnorFig3.jpg>)

*Fig. 3. Mu Mu*

The sudden rise in the popularity of blogs, specifically female-administered and female-centered blogs, may seem similar to traditionally Western feminist tactics in which young women use do-it-yourself methods of self-publication

through which they discuss personal and political issues in an often diaristic or confessional style. However, while Western feminisms often revolve around collective notions of identity or experience, Chinese women bloggers are making no such claims. On the contrary, the women's movement does not exist in the same way in China, and the label "feminist" is often used in a pejorative sense due to its Western connotations (Schaffer & Xianlin 2007, p. 17). Indeed, Chinese feminism, which Ya-Chen Chen describes in her book, *The Many Dimensions of Chinese Feminism*, as both "not one" and "not 'one,'" is not entirely recognized and impossible to conclusively define, existing as a multilayered confluence of native and Western ideology (Chen 2011, p.211). But despite the fact that Chinese sex bloggers are not unified under the collective identity associated with a defined feminist movement, it is clear that their motivation is not purely hedonistic self-indulgence; they are threatening the hegemonic discourse that circumscribes their gender identity as Woman.

Mu Zimei, Furong Jiejie, and Mu Mu challenge Chinese ideas of femininity by exercising their autonomy through sexual agency. These women use images of their bodies as vehicles to convey highly motivated messages claiming that women are active in the formation of their own gender identity. However, this idea is sharply contrasted with traditional Chinese gender roles that have been in a constant flux since 1966, the onset of Chairman Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution. Maoist thought posited women as gender-neutral beings; their equality came at the expense of their smothered sexuality. These neutered "iron-girls" commonly hid their bodies under baggy Mao suits, and the Chinese word for woman took on negative connotations and was discarded as women preferred to identify themselves as "revolutionary young" (Honig & Hershatter 1988, p. 309). Mao's proclamation that "Women hold up half the sky" seemed to enlist Chinese women as equal players in communist society, but in reality women's participation in the communist revolution ensured the eminence of the ruling class and patriarchal tradition (Zhou 2006, p. 59).

Feminist theorist Simone

DeBeauvoir's iconic statement, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," seems to materialize the socio-political objectives of Chinese women sex bloggers. DeBeauvoir continues:

*No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. Only the intervention of someone else can establish an individual as an Other. (de Beauvoir 1989, p.267)*



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/OConnorFig4.jpg>)

*Fig. 4. Cultural Revolution Iron Girls*

Indeed, Mu Zimei, Furong Jiejie, and Mu Mu are challenging masculinist notions of women as docile, weak, and passive as well as the social construct of the “iron-girl” through a potent use of text and image in conjunction with the viral nature of the Internet. Furthermore, they call attention to the fissure between Woman as a historical construct, a fictional archetype conforming to traditional notions of beauty, purity, and gender identity, and women as individual social beings (de Lauretis 1987, p. 5).

While the modern condition of Chinese femininity was formed around masculine hegemonic criteria during the Cultural Revolution, China’s Open Door policy resulted in a groundswell of interest in Western thought. In a stark backlash against Cultural Revolution gender-neutrality, some women constructed gender identity around sexually essentializing associations with the maternal, the domestic sphere, and commodity fetishism (Schaffer and Xianlin 2007). There developed a notion that women could achieve gender equality and sexual satisfaction through materialism, and Chinese Studies scholar Carolyn Cartier suggests that this idea of market feminism resulted in “an influential, state-aligned interpretation of the role of women as the new domestic consumers” (Cartier 2009, p.381). However, these claims to female subjectivity were clearly still circumscribed by a revolt against any lingering Maoist thought in conjunction with economically sanctioned materialism that ensured that this embrace of femininity was still governmentally validated.

As if in response to this identity crisis of China’s women, sex bloggers began utilizing the Internet as a stage to showcase their lack of inhibitions, not only sexually, but also in terms of gender association. Simultaneously recovering femininity repressed during

the Maoist era and avoiding any self-righteous commodification of appearance, Mu Zimei, Furong Jiejie, and Mu Mu focus on body-centered self-realization and resist traditional notions of love, sex and beauty. However, in his article "China's Women Sex Bloggers and Dialogic Sexual Politics on the Chinese Internet," James Farrer describes the widespread backlash against the Mu Zimei phenomenon and this new brand of self-actualization. Farrer claims that psychologist and sexologist Zhu Jiaming speculates that Mu Zimei's body may produce too much testosterone, increasing her sex drive and leading her to violate societal norms that ultimately punish men. Dr. Zhu continues, claiming, "From the point of view of mental health, she is not normal" (Farrer 2007, p. 16). Zhu's comments crystallize the backlash against this new expression of female agency, I contend, because it is hurtful to Chinese men, presumably because they have lost the ability to control the periphery. Therefore, women exhibiting a need for sexual fulfillment, a stereotypically masculine gender characteristic, threatens the immanence of the Chinese male body. In effect, Zhu's condemnation indicates anxiety over male impotence rather than an objective or informed medical opinion on female sexuality.

While Dr. Zhu posits sex bloggers to be psychologically abnormal, it is this contentious state of sexual "abnormality" that lends to the popularity as well as potency of Mu Zimei, Furong Jiejie, and Mu Mu's blogs. Their tendencies towards self-indulgence and exhibitionism could lay the bloggers open to interpretation as "sluts", party girls (small p), or "fame whores", but there are fissures in their sexual façades that sabotage the notion that these are just silly girls. This sex is strange. Indeed, the bloggers strategically use non-normative sexual signifiers as threatening sites of discourse. As such, Mu Zimei, Furong Jiejie, and Mu Mu appropriate the conception of abnormality and use its implication as fertile ground to critique normative notions of gender and sexuality as well as systemic oppression. The notion of sexual normality versus abnormality is imbued with a rich tension as the sex bloggers construct images, perform personalities, and assemble narratives that queer socially and politically constructed connotations of appropriate female behavior.

The sex bloggers co-option of "strange-ness" is readily apparent to the point that traditional signifiers of sexuality are sparse if not completely invisible. Mu Zimei's sexual diaries are not phantasmagorical accounts of ecstasy, but uncomfortable stories about taking a boy's virginity, sexual impotence, and lies. She describes one encounter with a married man: they had sex, he called his wife, and left, "only leaving in my wastebasket several condoms full of his semen" (Farrer 2007, p. 13). Her accounts are realistic, thought provoking, poignant, but not entirely sexy. Furthermore, Furong



Jiejie's blog is so fraught with strangeness that it even permeates her pseudonym as she names herself *Older Sister Hibiscus*. Though she lasciviously bends and twists her body, she always remains fully clothed. She vocally contests government censorship of her blog, and then publicly proposes marriage to France's 23<sup>rd</sup> president, Nicolas Sarkozy. Furong Jiejie juxtaposes "weirdness" with sexuality to the extent that the two are inextricable. Finally, Mu Mu parades in front of her camera wielding pots and pans—definitely not common signifiers of sexual availability. Furthermore, her titillating images are directly contrasted with her stance as a Communist Party member because morality and censorship are inextricably linked to the Communist Party (Farrer 2007, p. 28). Indeed, these curious combinations of sex and strangeness counteract ideas that these women have purely epicurean motives. The cracks in the surface of their sexual veneer beg further examination.



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/OConnorFig5.jpg>)

*Fig. 5. Furong Jiejie*



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/OConnorFig6.jpg>)

*Fig. 6. Mu Mu*

Indeed, as the chasm separating the bloggers' sexual lure and bizarre behavior widens, the women's calculated motivations begin to reveal themselves. As a lens through which to consider Mu Zimei's, Furong Jiejie's, and Mu Mu's lascivious performances of self, philosopher Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject is useful: a transgressive entity expelled from the center that inspires simultaneous and contrasting feelings of desire and disgust. Kristeva defines abjection as "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 1982, p. 4). Furthermore, the abject is opposed to the "I" and relegated to the boundaries while reifying official identity through its absence (Kristeva 1982, p. 2). In the case of China's sex bloggers, the threatening presence of a sexual discourse centered around and driven by a female body resulted in expulsion through censorship. Female autonomy was silenced to preserve order and define the "not us."

Another theoretical framework that resonates with these sex bloggers and their curious brand of self-actualization is cinema scholar Barbara Creed's theory of the Monstrous-Feminine, the figure whose function is to "bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability" (Creed 1993, p.11). For Mu Zimei, Furong Jiejie, and Mu Mu, that encounter lies at the border between Woman as cultural construct and women as historical figures, feminine sexuality and traditional modesty, normal and abnormal gender behavior, and finally, the female body and the patriarchal government. Creed continues that the Monstrous-Feminine can take on a number of different guises, most notably the *femme castratrice*, the woman as castrator as opposed to castrated. The *femme castratrice* is powerful, destructive, and an active agent in control of her body; she subverts the paradoxical notion that the phallogocentric center is defined and qualified through the castrated margin (Mulvey 1989, p. 14). Creed states, "The *femme castratrice* controls the sadistic gaze: the male victim is her object" (Creed 1993, p. 153). This version of the Monstrous-Feminine is particularly empowering to its female spectators who identify with a figure capable of confronting ideas of woman as 'lack' and subverting patriarchy and the male gaze. Furthermore, the *femme castratrice* is evident in the sex bloggers' carefully calculated sexual politics: Mu Zimei sadistically reveals her sex partners' names explaining her interest in "making them fear, loath, anger" (Farrer 2007, p. 13), Furong Jiejie exposes a body that challenges masculinist traditions of beauty and sexuality, and Mu Mu works from within borders of power and patriarchy only to question and then overthrow their

basis. Finally, each threatens Chinese censors due to their insistent exhibitionism that privileges a female depiction of a female body. At their core, China's women sex bloggers operate from within a contemporary condition in which female gender and sexuality are defined and controlled by outside voices that demand physical desirability and sexual availability in conjunction with Confucian gender ideals; Mu Zimei, Furong Jiejie, and Mu Mu subvert the signifiers of sexuality and use their bodies as potent tools to control the sexual economy.

China's fascination with blogospheric constructions of gender and the overnight popularity of sex bloggers is congruent with the socio-political implications that the freedom of the Internet provokes. CNBlog founder Isaac Mao explains the power of many voices, "In the past you could only share information with society in the structure given to you by authorities ... We want to share information freely" (MacKinnon 2008, p. 42). Additionally, China's censorship of blogs discussing more overtly subversive material, like politics and economics, could contribute to the creation and popularity of the ostensibly "less serious" sex diaries (Roberts 2010, p. 236). Essentially, the Communist government plays a role in the fabrication and destruction of sex bloggers; because "serious" blogs are censored and political dissidents hushed, netizens become absorbed in sex diaries, but when these women have similar motives—to question and subvert the assumed order—as their more apparently political counterparts, they are silenced and relegated to the margins. Indeed this is the case with Mu Zimei, Furong Jiejie, and Mu Mu. Symbolic embodiments of public and private repression, they are appropriating the master's tools of power and patriarchy to refute social norms (Wood 1968, p. 26). In part, these women's successes lie in their use of the Internet, which distributes the weight of netizens' voices and offers unprecedented opportunities for self-realization in addition to new sites for strange media praxis. Discussions of sex and tactics of power are inextricable, and it is clear that the discourse on sexual politics is not just that, but also a dialogue about free speech and democratic movement (Farrer 2007, p. 29). It is disingenuous to try to divorce the personal from the political, and the ambivalent realm of cyber reality creates a space where it is possible to question socially and politically prescribed gender and identity norms in relation to larger issues of free speech and human rights.

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**Footnotes** ( returns to text)

1. Sex blogger is a term used in both popular media and academia to describe Mu Zimei, Furong Jiejie, and Mu Mu, amongst others, based on their public display of ostensibly sexual photographs, text, and stories on the Internet via their personal blogs.
2. Mu Zimei's contribution to the online discourse on female sexuality is solely textual as opposed to Furong Jiejie and Mu Mu who have become well known due to the images they post. As a result, I will not discuss images of Mu Zimei, but she remains relevant to the topic because later sex bloggers are working largely within the context of an online revolution begun by Mu Zimei.
3. One of Furong Jiejie's more recent stunts was faking her own suicide in 2012. <http://www.heavy.com/news/2012/09/china-internet-superstar-furong-jiejie-commits-suicide/>

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