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China's Women Sex Bloggers and Dialogic Sexual Politics on the Chinese Internet

James Farrer

Abstract

Sexual politics on China's internet entered a new age with the "Mu Zimei phenomenon" in 2003. With the publication of Mu Zimei's sex diary and the controversy surrounding, millions of Chinese "netizens" became involved in a debate over sexual rights that involve a wide variety of claims and counter claims, including claims of freedom of expression, social progress, natural rights, property rights, women's rights, rights of privacy, and community responsibilities. The cases of Mu Zimei and subsequent women bloggers point out how sexual rights discourse should be understood as an adversarial dialogue among a variety of social actors using a variety of discursive frameworks, a view consistent with a dialogic conception of sexual politics on the internet.[1] (Manuscript received March 3, 2007; accepted for publication July 12, 2007)

Keywords: Internet, China, sexuality, blogs, women, citizenship, rights

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Studie

Chinas Sexbloggerinnen und der dialogische Charakter des sexualpolitischen Diskurses im Internet

James Farrer

Abstract

Mit dem Phänomen Mu Zimei erhielt das Thema Sexualpolitik im Jahr 2003 eine neue Qualität. Mit der Veröffentlichung ihres Sextagebuchs durch Mu Zimei und den folgenden Kontroversen wurden Millionen von chinesischen Netizens in eine Debatte um sexuelle Rechte hineingezogen, in der eine große Bandbreite von Positionen zu Redefreiheit, sozialem Fortschritt, natürlichen Rechten, Urheberrechten, Frauenrechten, Recht auf Privatsphäre und Verantwortung gegenüber der Gemeinschaft aufeinanderprallen. Das Phänomen Mu Zimei und weiterer Sexbloggerinnen zeigt, dass der Diskurs über sexuelle Rechte als konfrontativer Dialog zwischen vielfältigen sozialen Akteuren verstanden werden kann, die sich verschiedener diskursiver Bezugssysteme bedienen – eine Deutung, die im Einklang mit einer dialogischen Konzeption von Sexualpolitik im Internet steht.[1] (Manuskript eingereicht am 03.03.2007; zur Veröffentlichung angenommen am 12.07.2007)

Keywords: Internet, China, Sexualität, Blogs, Frauen, Staatsbürgerschaft, Anrechte

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Introduction

> Finally, we have to pay attention to our own standpoint. Are we standing on the side of revolution or the side of counter-revolution? I am on the side of revolution, and I believe that everyone here in this room is also on the side of revolution. Our common purpose is through our individual efforts to make the common people of China also choose the side of revolution! (Li Yinhe, 15 October 2005, People's University in Beijing)

> Recently my feelings have been really conflicted. For a longtime I have heard people criticizing cynicism. A liberal (Chinese) thinker living overseas whom I respect, has criticized the rampant cynicism of Mainland Chinese intellectuals. The sad thing is that in China cynicism is often our only choice. Now I am faced with this choice: my leader is receiving pressure from "not-ordinary citizens", hoping that I will shut my mouth.... Looking at matters like same sex marriage, perhaps my country has not arrived at the necessary stage of development. At the point in history when it is ready to change, it will change. At that point I perhaps can only be an observer of these changes and no longer a participant. (Li Yinhe 2007)

Out of context, one might place the first quote in China's cultural revolution in the late 1960s. Instead, it came at the end of an address to students and scholars about another revolution thirty years later: China's sexual revolution. The speaker was China's leading public voice on sexuality, Li Yinhe, of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, concluding a keynote address at the 10th Annual "Conference on Chinese Sexuality" in Beijing. The call to revolution was met by vigorous applause, but also with smiles at the ironic but provocative appropriation of the rhetoric of revolution. Nowadays, Li Yinhe's ideas are more well-known from her blog and from media reports on China's main internet portals than from her numerous scholarly publications on topics such as homosexuality, queer theory, women's sexuality and sadomasochism (Li Yinhe & Wang 1992; Li Yinhe 1998, 2000, 2006). She has been a central public figure in internet debates on same-sex marriage, "one-night" love, pornography and "swapping spouses" (Li Yinhe 2003; Jinqiusuoguo 2007). In all cases, she has supported expanding rights of sexual expression (Tao 2007a).

But the road to sexual revolution in China is not a smooth one. The second

quote above describes Li Yinhe's decision to step out of the public limelight and not write about sexual matters because of pressures from unnamed high government officials. It remains to be seen if Li Yinhe will indeed permanently step out of the public sphere. Indeed some Chinese netizens (*wangmin*) hoped she would "shut up"; while others pointed out the irony of her posting her decision to "shut up" on a popular blog thus producing another media event (Zuiyankansha 2007).

Sexual discussions in China did not begin on the internet. Each type of social space shapes the development of sexual discourse. In Qing China sexual discussions of various types proliferated in the social spaces of the brothels, courtesan houses and theaters. Associated with these specific moral and spatial contexts, there were numerous genres of semi-underground "guides" and "manuals", almost exclusively aimed at entertainment and pleasure rather than moral or ethical discussion (Hershatter 1997; Wu 2004; Ren 2007). In the early twentieth century, scientific sexological discourses imported from the West began appearing in numerous pamphlets and books of Chinese authors, such as Zhang Jingsheng's 1926 *Xingshi* (History of Sex) (Wang Xuefeng 2007). Sex became increasingly a public discourse associated with the problems of national health and modernization (Hershatter 1994). After the founding of the People's Republic of China, limited public discussions of sexuality in state-run periodicals continued, with a strong heteronormative focus on married life and disciplined citizenship (Evans 1997). Not all discussions were normative, of course. Even during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), a period when public discussion of sexuality was allegedly taboo, hand-copied books allowed readers to share scatological sexual stories. However, ownership or production of such materials could lead to criminal or political prosecution (Honig 2003).

The opening and reform period dating from 1978 has seen a proliferation of spaces for discussing sexuality and a increasing diversity of voices. In the immediate aftermath of the Chinese Communist Party's repudiation of the Cultural Revolution, literary journals and novels became a medium for the celebration of romantic love as an ethical standard for sexual behavior. In the early 1980s, popular songs imported from Taiwan and Hong Kong promulgated ideals of romance that had criticized as bourgeois liberalization in the previous three decades. By the mid 1980s, readers of popular magazines could write letters to editors debating controversial topics such as extramarital love, divorce and premarital sex (Honig & Hershatter 1988; Farrer 2002). Radio call-in shows

were the popular interactive forum in the early 1990s, eclipsed by television in the late 1990s (Erwin 2000; Farrer 2006). Partly because of the liberalization of the publishing industry, novels featuring sexual themes became popular in the late 1990s. By 2000 young viewers could watch foreign programs such as "Sex and the City" on DVD's, thereby bypassing state censors. The internet is the latest addition to this list of media for public sexual discussions. Most observers would agree that China's media "sexual revolution" has entered a dynamic new phase due to the development of sexual discussions on to the internet. As will be discussed more below, the internet has vastly enlarged the range of sexual topics, the explicitness of sexual discussions, the scope of citizen participation and, above all, the degree of interactive debate.

Sexual politics in China entered the internet age with the "Mu Zimei phenomenon" in 2003 – referring to a young Guangzhou woman's blog about her sexual adventures and the reactions to it. Because of its importance as the first major sexual debate on the internet, this paper focuses on the Mu Zimei controversy as well as the public figures, especially Li Yinhe, who figured in the Mu Zimei debate. I believe these discussions show that: (1) rather than an effectively "depoliticized" area of titillating pornographic entertainment and "packaged dissent", (Barme 1993), discussions of sexuality on the Chinese internet are an arena in which sexual rights are debated and dissenting positions to government policies and practices are articulated; (2) the rhetoric of sexual rights must be understood as pluralistic and dialogical rather than governed by a single political logic, shared discourse or even a search for consensus; (3) the internet is an arena in which state actors work not simply as censors but as Johan Lagervist argues, as "negotiating and interacting" with netizens (Lagervist 2006:14) in often adversarial dialogues. Indeed "official" or "state" agents may be active on *both* sides of a debate.

The methodology of this study is an ethnographic exploration of the space of sexual debate on the Chinese internet, taking the Mu Zimei debates as a starting point. Ethnographic methods attempt to follow discussions according to naturalistic patterns rather than a principle of statistical sampling (Lagervist 2006; Miller & Slater 2001; Constable 2003). They can not be counted on to produce numerical measures of data or anything but a very rough "sense" of the quantitative weight that should be attached to an argument. (I thus give only some very rough suggestions as to which "side" in a debate seemed most popular, usually based on secondary sources.) For this study, starting with mainstream

media reports and the Mu Zimei blog itself, links were followed that indicated interesting or novel perspectives, searches were conducted on Baidu.com and google.com around the subject of Mu Zimei. Popular and prominent arguments were noted, and alternative or oppositional positions were attended to even if they were not most common. In what was clearly framed as a "debate", both sides of the debate were important, regardless of who seemed to be "winning" (indeed this is a key point of this article). The searches were conducted closely after and during the debate itself, so that I also was able to access some of the controversial opinions that seem to have later removed by the host sites.

Related news was followed over several years. Based on these sources I attempted to piece together the conversations that actors online were participating in and the media stories they were reacting to, much as would an avid consumer of Chinese internet media. There is no objective standard for judging such an ethnographic sample of online texts. Another observer might have linked and searched differently and reconstructed a different dialogue among texts. The picture of sexual discourse that I present here is thus partial and not independent of the perspective of a single observer.

I conducted one interview by email on April 20, 2004 with Li Li (Mu Zimei's "real" name, or her creator) to supplement the accounts available online. Conducted by email correspondence, Li Li's reply filled three and a half single space printed pages. Though I do quote from the interview, this paper does not focus on Li Li the person, but on what Chinese commentators quickly named the "Mu Zimei phenomenon", the public debate around her internet diary. Considering the Mu Zimei phenomenon in terms of its multiple discursive elements allows us to consider to what extent the internet has transformed the content and form of the debates over sexual rights in China.

Sexual Citizenship, Dialogic Politics and the Role of the State

Sociologist Kenneth Plummer describes "intimate citizenship" as a cluster of rights and responsibilities that have emerged in the twentieth century around issues of sexual partner choices, control over the body, reproductive rights, intimate bonds and sexual identities (Plummer 1995, 1996). Plummer writes,

> These rights and responsibilities are not "natural" or "inalienable" but have to be invented through human activities, and built into the notions of communities, citizenship and identities. (Plummer 1995:150)

Plummer thus outlines a civil society model of citizenship that focuses on the role

of citizens in the creation of the norms that govern them through participation in public debates. Storytelling is central to Plummer's model. According to Plummer, shared stories allow for collective social action and community formation that actualize notions of citizenship. Plummer points out that the sexual citizenship and sexual rights are seldom articulated through a final agreement on principles, rather rights are defined as positions in dialogues that are often adversarial (Plummer 2003). Building on Plummer's ideas, I used this paper to develop a dialogic conception of sexual rights discourse on the Chinese internet. I prefer to use the term "sexual citizenship" because "intimacy" seems too normative of a term. As Mu Zimei points out, sex does not have to involve emotional intimacy.

Plummer's conception of dialogic sexual politics is consistent with a rhetorical conception of culture, one that emphasizes the emergent nature of ideological positions through social interactions and dialogue (Billig 1987). In dialogue positions are created and defended that may not represent the ideas of any one participant, but are outcomes of the communicative process itself. In social psychological terms, dialogues involve alternative and contesting "accounts" that people use to justify and excuse themselves (Scott & Lyman 1968). Political discourses about sexuality thus develop through argument and persuasion in specific social contexts (Farrer 2006). Dialogic conceptions of culture point out that arguments also contain their opposites – "progress" implies the possibility decline, "nature" implies the possibility of the unnatural. When studying the politics of sexual ethics we should not look for agreement or consensus, but rather attempt to understand the social processes contexts and cultural terms in which ethical disagreements are framed. For scholars who emphasize the importance of dialogue, agreement may not even be desirable (Muroi 1999). In ethical and political terms what matters is the respect for "otherness" implicit in the practice of dialogue, that is recognizing that the "other" has a right to hold a position at all (Zene 1999). Borrowing from Mikhail Bakhtin, one could argue that internet discussions such as this are inherently "heteroglossic" – bringing texts in conversations with other texts, mixing genres and political and ethical logics (Bakhtin 1981). In China, where censorship is still active, there may be topics and voices that are excluded from dialogue altogether (though even the defenders of censorship on issues such as sexuality may resort to dialogue to make their cases). In general, my dialogic conception of sexual rights emphasizes: (a) how multiple ethical and political positions emerge in civil society conversions, (b) how these positions are influenced by argument and opposition, and (c) how

the social organization of the dialogue shapes whose voices are excluded or included.

The concepts of sexual citizenship or intimate citizenships have been grounded in the experience of a western-style public sphere or civil society. Both Chinese and Western scholars of China have debated the usefulness of the terms "citizenship" (*gongminchuan*) and "rights" (*chuanli*) in discussing Chinese social and political activism (cf Goldman & Perry 2002). I suggest that these concepts are relevant to debates on sexual ethics on the internet, if only because terms such as "rights", "freedom" and "citizenship" are used directly by many of the participants in these debates. Increasingly, the internet has emerged as the most important space for civil society activism in China (Yang 2003; Giese 2004, 2006). Yang Guobin argues that the Chinese internet allows for the emergence of a civil society discourse of a higher density and interactivity than previous media, but we must also be aware of the ways in which discussions in the larger society shape the development of internet discussions (Yang 2003; see also Miller & Slater 2001). With recent developments in internet censorship systems and filtering technologies, early predictions that the internet would bring free political discussions to China now seem overly optimistic (Giese 2004). In his research on the Chinese internet, Johan Lagervist points out the seeming paradox, that "government control of and social freedom on China's Internet are growing simultaneously" (Lagervist 2006:13). The research reported here tends to support Lagervist's claim. With all internet service providers owned by the state, the Chinese internet is under strict, and perhaps even increasingly strict government control. In 2004 the two largest blog hosts, Blogcn.com and Blogbus.com, both were occasionally shut down by government censors for allowing postings critical of the government (Reporters without Borders 2004). In 2004 all websites were required to register with the Ministry of Information, which increasingly uses sophisticated filtering systems to block searches for certain political and sexual topics and block access to politically sensitive and "pornographic" websites (Hachigan 2002; Open Net Initiative 2006). In practice, however, censorship of sexual content on the Chinese internet seems primarily directed at websites featuring explicit sexual images. Texts discussing sexual topics face only occasional direct censorship. Netizens on internet blogs freely discuss personal sexual experiences, openly search for sex partners and debate moral standards, and openly criticize regulations and laws regarding sexual behaviors. Even in cases such as the censorship of Mu Zimei's blog and pressures on Li Yinhe to limit her

public support for sexual rights, the activities of the state cannot be surmised merely in terms of censorship and control.

Discussions of progress in sexual rights in China mirror debates on internet citizenship. In her study of the debates on prostitution in China, Elaine Jeffreys writes that we must not fall into a kind of "repressive hypothesis" in which the state is only understood as censoring sexual discourse and restricting sexual freedoms (Jeffreys 2004, 2006). Rather we must see the ways in which state-affiliated actors – including government administrators, media representatives, university professors, police and others – have actively participated in the creation of new forms of sexual culture in China. Indeed, socialist-inspired policies sometimes have been on the vanguard of defining sexual rights, such as the right to a free choice of a spouse, and the right to divorce. This point is also well taken in analyzing the "Mu Zimei phenomenon" and the other female bloggers discussed below. Media representatives, including journalists and editors of official party publications, as well as scholars and government research institutes, and medical doctors all participated in the debate about Mu Zimei. In the end, their statements were at least as important as those of everyday "netizens" in articulating forms of sexual rights discourse. This paper explores the ways in which the public dialogue about sexual rights was advanced through an adversarial but productive dialogue involving these semi-official government voices as well as independent or private voices on the internet. In sum, I would urge us to consider that, despite censorship and government controls, popular discussions on the internet are a site for claiming and defining liberal sexual rights. Secondly, I would expand Plummer's dialogic conception of rights discourse to more explicitly include state actors as well as the private voices and civil society organizations he focuses upon. Most importantly, I will outline the diverse or "heteroglossic" nature of the rights discourses in these internet discussions. These include multiple and sometimes contradictory claims to rights, including claims based on societal progress and scientific expertise, claims based on human biology, rights to privacy, women's sexual rights and moral and aesthetic prejudices about who has a right to represent themselves sexually on the internet. We also have to become aware that the online discourse of sexual rights in China is no longer dominated by "sex radicals" or "liberals." Conservative voices have also found ways of articulating their ethical standards in terms of rights and responsibilities. But before we consider this wider debate, I will first recount the origins of the Mu Zimei controversy.

Left-over Love Letters

In June 19, 2003, a 25 year-old Guangzhou magazine editor Li Li began posting a diary of her numerous love affairs on the Chinese internet site Blogcn.com, using the penname Mu Zimei. At first her blog received little notice except from her friends. Then in August she posted an account of her one-night affair with Wang Lei a rock star from Guangzhou, including his real name (Wan 2003). By October, her page was receiving over 6,000 hits a day making it the most popular personal blog ever in China (Jinyangwang 2003a). On November 11, 2004, three major internet news sites published articles on Mu Zimei (Wang 2003). Daily hits to her blog reached 110,000, and for a short time the "Mu Zimei phenomenon" was the most talked-about topic on the Chinese internet (Chinadaily.com 2003a). 20 million visitors reportedly accessed her diary on one day on Sina.com (Pomfret 2003). She was flooded with requests for interviews. Perhaps her most widely quoted line was a challenge to a reporter that he must first sleep with her if he wanted to interview her, "the longer the sex, the longer the interview" (Fan 2003). Her diary was posted on countless sites with thousands of comments from ordinary "internet citizens" (*wangmin*) appearing on bulletin boards, some praising her daring lifestyle but many more criticizing her moral standards. According to an article in the official *China Youth Daily* only about 10 percent of internet bulletin board postings supported Mu Zimei, while 90 percent were critical (Wan 2003; see also Li Zhongzhi 2003).

Given the controversy, Mu Zimei seemed like a mixed blessing for Chinese internet service providers. As the CEO of one blog hosting company, Jiang Qiping said to a reporter, "The Mu Zimei phenomenon was an inevitable development in China; it is just that it probably came too soon" (Wan 2003). The Mu Zimei blog was shut down, ostensibly because of the heavy traffic, but also its controversial sexual content. The Ministry of Propaganda banned publication of Li Li's diary in book form and prohibited her from publishing under either her penname Mu Zimei or given name Li Li. According to the interview with Li Li, Chinese media were banned from publishing interviews with her, and she was fired from her job as a magazine editor. The censorship contributed to a brief burst of global notoriety. The *Washington Post* correspondent declared her a messenger of "sexual revolution" (Pomfret 2003). In her email interview for this research project Li Li herself saw her writing in more personal terms.

> I wrote this diary not in order to start a debate or participate in a public

> conversation. [...] I write about my actual sexual experiences because I personally don't have any sexual restrictions. I am a writer, and I am also a sex columnist. I like to record my real life, including my private life.

Mu Zimei began her career as a public sexual radical while she was still a third year university student, self-publishing a list of her sexual achievements including her shortest and longest relationship and her total number of sexual partners (Pei 2003). She considers the act of writing an accessory to her self-explorations through sex itself, a form of "writing through the body". In her April 2004 email interview, she said that she had sex with more than 80 men, beginning four years earlier at age 21. Her blog continued these practices of self-exploration and self-disclosure in a much more accessible public venue. Mu Zimei described her lifestyle in a magazine interview:

> Since I don't have to go to work, I just watch DVDs, get on the internet, or go to some bars. If I find a guy I like, I will chat with him, have a drink and then go home for a one-night stand. I am not afraid, because I can easily fall in love with a guy, easily go to bed with him, and easily part with him. (Jinyangwang 2003b)

This description of her daily routine could also be a summary of her internet diary, which she named "Left-over Love Letters" (*yiqingshu*) (Mu 2003a).

Not all of her entries describe sexual experiences. Some detail melancholy afternoons alone or conversations with friends in bars. Her style is belletristic rather than pornographic, focusing more on contexts and feelings than simply bodies in motion. Like the so-called "pretty woman writers" Wei Hui and Mian Mian with whom she is often compared, Mu Zimei's diary situates her erotic experiences in a fashionable urban context of bars and clubs, cool artistic friends and witty, ironic conversation. She laces her sexual autobiography with references to western and Japanese film, pop music and literature. Her diary entries also include some juvenile humor. Her August 27, 2003, entry titled "His biggest good attribute" (*zuida youdian*) involves an extended joke about a former boyfriend's penis size (ibid.).

Some of her most popular entries take the form of terse prose poems that mimic the clipped, telescoped communication of the one-night stand. For instance her July 4, 2003, entry entitled "Morality Piece" (*lunlipian*) begins as follows:

> He said he would be here in twenty minutes.
> I just finished my shower,

Cleaned up the room
And waited for a strange man to come and make love.
When the man enters her home, her account continues:
"any threesome experience, previous sexual adventures?"
Standard one-night stand questions for those born in the late 70s
Pretty pragmatic.
We took off our clothes and got in bed. (Mu 2003a)

Many of her entries brag about her violations of conventional ideals of love and romance. In her June 27, 2003, entry entitled "Come drought or flood" (*hanlao baoshou*) she describes looking for a man to spend the night with after her hot-water heater breaks. She writes that she often went to a man's house for a hot shower when she was a third-year university student.

> Each time we had sex three times in one night, and I didn't even have to date him. I was so happy. That winter I was the warmest girl in the dormitory.

The ability to separate sex from emotional entanglements is a central focus of her writing. Li Li told a *New York Times* reporter, "I do not oppose love, but I oppose loyalty; if love has to be based on loyalty, I will not choose love" (Yardley 2003). For her, sex without love is a positive achievement, but also one that presents many interpersonal and emotional difficulties.

In an essay entitled "You are my first" (*ni shi wo diyi ge*), she describes having sex with a man a year younger than herself (Mu 2003b). When they begin to have sex, he suddenly says, "I love you". She responds by telling him to get a condom out of her drawer. He doesn't know how to use it, and she orders him impatiently, "Read the instructions in the box". After they have had sex, he shyly asks her how many men she has slept with. She refuses to answer. When he blurts out, "You are my first", she is repulsed by his admission, and throws him out of her house telling him to never return. She writes that she now understands why some men are afraid of virgins. The attachment people feel to their first partner is too much to deal with. She concludes, you can't blame someone for being a virgin, but, on the other hand sex is a series of exchanges, and they balance out in the end. What you lose here, you will gain somewhere else. Mu Zimei's affairs are thus complex case studies in the practical techniques, ethical dilemmas and emotional management of casual sex. Another recurrent feature of her reports is her brusque treatment of men who don't live up to her expectations.

Despite her claims to be writing a private diary, Mu Zimei also presented

herself as a sexual radical. In her September 7, 2003, entry entitled "Liberation" (*jiefang*) she describes her cultural mission in nearly Nietzschean language:

> The liberation of the self will always be opposed by social norms. But unless people bound up in moral prohibitions can transcend their own "slave nature" then they will never have a true self. When I write my sex columns, I think that the liberation of human nature is more important than just writing about the body. The truth that people express in sexual intercourse is difficult to find in other everyday experiences. Nakedness and sexual intercourse are the most effective ways to express human nature. (Mu 2003a)

For Mu Zimei, sex is a window onto the truths of men, as well as their lies. The "truths" she claims to have discovered about men include their masochistic tendencies, homosexual tendencies, internet affairs, stocking fetishes and sexual impotence. But, she focuses on their lies, including the man who told her that he had 40 lovers and then later denied it, and the man who after making love to her, called his wife and said he was at the office, "only leaving in my waste basket several condoms full of his semen". Her public revelation of the names of some of her lovers seems part of her obsession with the truths and lies revealed through sex. "I love stirring up trouble with them", she writes, "making them fear, loathe, anger, because they then have a true response" (ibid.).

As Michel Foucault warns, such claims to freedom and truth through sex are fraught with hidden normative claims and tactics of power (Foucault 1978). Despite her seemingly naïve hopes for liberation through the truth of sex, Mu Zimei's seems to have recognized that sexual storytelling is a tactic of power and a site of social contestation. The "truths" Mu reveals are often direct affronts at her partner's cherished sense of public propriety – and perhaps the social standards they represent. However, she doesn't always have the last word. Mu Zimei's practice of "outing" her lovers, and seeking truth through confrontation, allows for aggressive responses to her writing, whether on the web or in person. September 15, 2003, entry entitled "Women's liberation movement" (*funü jiefang yundong*) describes a bar fight between her and the girlfriend of a man whose name appeared in her columns. The "movement" consists of her own female friends volunteering to fight for her (Mu 2003a). For Mu Zimei, self-expression through sex and writing about sex involve constantly pushing the limits of what is proper and moral.

In the end, Mu Zimei may have been more successful than she expected in

offending public sensibilities. As her fame grew in late 2003, thousands of readers posted responses to her blog entries. Articles about Mu Zimei also generated dozens of internet postings each, as well as responses from other journalists and editors. Some readers defended her, but many condemned her as immoral, indecent and lacking basic human values, one prominent article describing her as "the woman condemned by the entire country" (Wan 2003). This outpouring of public discussion became know as the "Mu Zimei phenomenon". The new "truths" revealed in this debate included the political influence of moral conservatives on the internet, but also the multiple moral fault lines and a widening sense of sexual diversity in Chinese society.

Competing Claims for Sexual Rights in the Mu Zimei Controversy

As described above the debate over Mu Zimei's blog soon developed into a full-scale controversy over sexual rights. Below I provide examples of the different claims and counterclaims that formed a free-ranging and heteroglossic debate around sexual rights in contemporary China.

Sexual Rights as Social Progress

Mu Zimei's writings were widely associated with a narrative of sexual opening up (*xingkaifang*) (Farrer 2002) or sexual modernization in China (Hershatter 1994). In an essay entitled "How I see the Mu Zimei phenomenon", posted on Sina.com's health page during the height of the Mu Zimei controversy, sociologist Li Yinhe cited Mu Zimei as an example of expanding sexual rights in a modernizing China (Li Yinhe 2003). Already a regular participant in internet discussions on sexual culture, Li was the most prominent of Mu Zimei's advocates in the public discussions of November 2003. Although she claimed she had never actually read Mu's diary (Zeng 2003), Li argues that the "Mu Zimei phenomenon" shows how much sexual rights have expanded in China. Li describes a legal case of a woman who in the 1980s was arrested and imprisoned for "seducing several men and having promiscuous sexual relations with them". This sentence now seems ridiculous, Li argues. Both extramarital sex and premarital sex have become common in China, so using legal prosecution to punish sex outside of marriage seems more and more "absurd" (*huangtang*). According to Li's essay, Mu Zimei's writings show that China is entering a stage in which men and women both enjoy sexual freedom.

Many postings by ordinary "netizens" placed Mu Zimei's diary within a narrative of "opening up". As one person wrote, "Mu Zimei's appearance shows that our society is more and more tolerant, more and more pluralistic" (Wan 2003). To many others however, both her writings and her lifestyle were shamefully "open". One person who described herself as the mother of a 12 year-old child called for censorship of the internet, writing, "Can it be that no one is going to do anything about such shameful, immoral people?". Others simply dismissed her blogging activities as commercially motivated (ibid.).

Although most critics agreed that Mu Zimei's writings represented a new step in the direction of "sexual opening" not everyone agreed with Li Yinhe's support for Mu Zimei's version of sexual modernity. Li Zhongzhi, columnist for the official *China Youth Daily* directly attacked Li Yinhe, arguing we "cannot abandon value judgments in the pursuit of tolerance" (Li Zhongzhi 2003). He acknowledged that society had no right to interfere in Mu Zimei's private life and certainly not to prosecute her sexual behavior legally. However, he says, our tolerance should stop there. "Mu Zimei's attempt to overturn all social norms and morality does not seem to be the proper moral values for a healthy society". Especially among the "masses of poorly educated people and young people who lack rational judgment", such sexual descriptions will easily mislead them into promiscuous sexual behavior. He quotes a message from a mother on the internet:

> Dear ladies and gentlemen, we are human beings. We are not animals! We are people, and we should respect social morality. My daughter is now in high school. She says that some of her classmates are reading Mu Zimei everyday. Some really look up to her. As a mother, I can only be very worried. (Li Zhongzhi 2003)

Addressing Li Yinhe in particular, Li Zhongzhi concludes by arguing that scholars and media professionals should not "lose the courage to make value judgments". Mu Zimei's diary should be banned for violating Chinese obscenity laws, he argues. Bulletin board esponses to Li Zhongzhi's article were mixed. One blogger named Dai Gou defended sociologist Li Yinhe against journalist Li Zhongzhi, arguing that the journalist's references to Li Yinhe were ungrounded and unprincipled (Dai 2003).

Responding herself to these charges, Li Yinhe stated her own views about sexual morality in a liberal society. The primary moral principle is not to hurt others, she argues. This includes not forcing others to do things they are

unwilling to do. "A reasonable society is a society with pluralistic moral values, including multiple sexual values and lifestyles", she concluded (Li Yinhe 2003). In Li Yinhe's argument, Mu Zimei remained a symbol of a progressive sexual modernity defined by individual rights and an openness to sexual diversity. For others, her writings were an example of the excessive "sexual opening" that China should avoid.

Sexual Rights as Natural Rights

Many supporters of Mu Zimei phrased their defense of her sexual choices in a discourse of "nature", or the innate qualities of sexual desire. Li Yinhe writes that the fulfillment of all sensual pleasures and needs are "naturally given rights" (*tianfu renquan*) (Li Yinhe 2003). One bulletin board posting by "Ah Lei" argues that the pursuit of sexual pleasure is a biological instinct and thus should not be confined to monogamous marriage (Kangyiwang 2003). A posting on the same site by "Piao Miao" argues more cautiously that "parents should learn to guide children on how to naturally perceive and deal with their instinctual desires" (ibid.). Mu Zimei framed her personal views of sex entirely in the language of popular socio-biology, dismissing "sexual morality" entirely. In reply to my email questions about "sexual morality", Li Li wrote:

> I strongly argue for a humanistic view, and not for some kind of socialized morality. Sex is determined by the body, and love is a product of internal secretions.

Sexual rights should not be denied, she argues, because ultimately sex is a natural impulse determined by internal biological drives.

However, media detractors of Mu Zimei also availed themselves of a naturalistic rhetoric of psychological and social "health". Zhu Jiaming, a psychologist and sexologist, speculated that perhaps Mu Zimei suffered from an overly high level of male hormones that might increase her sex drive, or perhaps she was a person with an obsession with novelty (*lieqi xinli*) or was simply trying to make money through her fame. "In any case", Zhu added, "the Mu Zimei phenomenon should not be promoted because it violates the sexual civilization of this society". A Dr. Huang speculated that by making her stories public she might both be punishing herself for her anti-social behavior and punishing men at the same time. "From the point of view of mental health, she is not normal" (Yao 2003). One netizen posting from November 29, 2003, on a 21cn.com bulletin board echoed the psychological pathologization of Mu Zimei: "She has some kind

of psychological disorder". In rebuttal another writer posted on November 30, 2003: "She's done nothing wrong. Those who say so have a problem with their own way of thinking that has unbalanced their minds" (21cn.com 2003).

Many critics of Mu Zimei focused on a conventional moral distinction between human nature and animal nature, including the idea that for humans sex is naturally connected to love. The comments of "Mengxinglema" on a a.com posting were typical of this type of naturalistic moral critique:

> What is her purpose? What's her point? To express her attitude about sex? Do you think people can act like animals? Is sexual love (*xingai*) that simple, just a natural event? Can sex without love be called sexual love? It is just a kind of release? Of course, people can't live without sex. But we don't need this flavorless sex, this sex that is so close to animal passion. (Blogchina 2003)

Though arguing for opposing standards, both sides of the debate availed themselves of a rhetoric in which sex was equated with nature and sexual rights with a standard of personal and social health. This notion of sexuality as tied to "nature" serves as a powerful dialogic tool both for claiming and limiting sexual rights.

Sexual Rights as Women's Rights

This debate on rights also generated claims that Mu Zimei was a feminist supporting the rights of women to sexual autonomy. Li Yinhe argued that Mu Zimei's writing is a question not only of individual rights, but of women's rights in particular. A woman should not be singled out for prosecution for her sexual relations with men.

> This is a question of "a woman's basic rights". The law should protect women's rights to have voluntary sexual relations with men, instead of punishing them. (Li Yinhe 2003)

Ma Qiufeng, a sociologist at Jinan University challenged Li Yinhe's argument that Mu Zimei was standing up for women's sexual rights (Yao 2003). Mu Zimei's sexual relations do not represent true male-female equality, Ma argues, because "real sexual equality should be based on mutual respect, whereas Mu Zimei's attitude was one of just playing around with each other (*huxiang wannong*)".

Anonymous bulletin board comments also referred to specific gender rights. Several postings defended Mu Zimei as an example of women's struggle for sexual rights. One wrote:

> I admire her naked courage. Isn't it true that men have a hidden desire to invade and conquer women? By the same token, Mu Zimei is a man among woman. She is a woman who wants to invade and conquer men. (Fan 2003)

Another wrote, "What is morality? Morality is men's morality. If men can fulfill their sexual desires, why can't we women?" (21cn.com 2003). Like arguments about sexual "opening up" and human nature, these arguments about specific gendered rights could be used to support or detract from Mu Zimei's actions.

Sexual Rights as Free Speech Rights

Rights to free speech also figured prominently in these competing definitions of sexual rights. Li Yinhe appealed to the Chinese constitution and its protections of rights of free speech to contest the banning Mu Zimei's writings (Li Yinhe 2003). In an interview responding to Li Zhongzhi's charges that she was promoting obscenity, Li Yinhe replied that Chinese laws against obscenity are unreasonable because "70 or 80 percent of the population" has already seen such materials. Li agrees that people will have different reactions to Mu Zimei's website. However, as an adult she has rights both to physical self-determination (*renshen ziyou de quanli*) and rights to freedom of expression (*yanlun ziyou de quanli*). Both of these rights are protected in the constitution (Zeng 2003).

Participants in the incipient blogging community generally defended Mu Zimei's rights to free speech. While "Blog China" itself claimed to be acting to protect an open and free "blogger community" (*boke shequ*), several postings on the blogs' "ethics page" questioned the site's dedication to free speech in its treatment of Mu Zimei. One blogger named "Bianfu" wrote:

> I think the Mu Zimei phenomenon is really a typical product of China. I don't know why we let people express themselves, and then because their impact is too great we shut them down? Why is this? Why can't people just speak directly? Why all these restrictions? Blogging is a foreign cultural import. Why bring in something from outside and then change it beyond all recognition? What we are striving for is just that kind of freedom! ! ! ! (sic). (Blogchina.com 2003)

Another blogger "Mrlittleyu" wrote on the same page: "People should follow the rules, but the most important thing is freedom" (ibid.).

Other public voices defended censorship. In a chat room discussion hosted by Sohu.com, Peng Bo, the influential editor of the official *China Youth* magazine

criticized the media that promoted the Mu Zimei phenomenon (Sohu.com 2003). Mu Zimei's private sex life was her own concern, he said, and within her rights as an individual, but publishing her diary on the internet was a public danger to the morality of youth. Major internet sites such as Sohu.com bore an even greater responsibility for promoting her. Media should be concerned not only with their profits, but with the benefits to society and the country. We should not confuse a decadent lifestyle with enlightenment, Peng said. Readers he spoke with found Mu Zimei's diary disgusting (*exin*), he said. Journalists should be showing youth "beautiful things" (*meihao de dongxi*) about love and sex, meaning images of romantic feelings and true committed relationships. Would the webmasters want their daughters and young sisters reading this diary, he asked (ibid.). Though employing strong condemning language reminiscent of the political campaigns of the Maoist era, Peng's own ethical standard of romantic "beauty" would itself have been labeled bourgeois decadence under the Maoist regime.

Sexual Rights as Legal Rights and Property Rights

The debate also involved mobilization of legal expertise both against Mu Zimei and in support. Guangzhou Business School Associate Professor of Law Wei Xiuling agreed that Mu's sexual relationships with multiple men, including casual affairs with married men, violated no laws; however, her use of real names in her online diary could be a violation of the men's privacy and that internet operators have a legal responsibility for preventing this. Finally, her repeated and explicit descriptions of sex acts aimed at a broad public might violate obscenity laws (Yao 2003).

Mu Zimei's own public defense also focused on her legal rights. After her blog was removed from ChinaBlog.com, she posted a temporary message on her blog denouncing her critics, but also digging at patronizing defenders. In a message dated November 17, 2003, she wrote:

> Please do not show your "tolerance" for me. I have already tolerated the condemnations of the entire country [. . .]. Respect my rights because I am already standing up for all of your rights.[2]

Here she is referring less to her rights to free speech than her intellectual property rights, the ownership of the material she put up on the net, and that was rapidly

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[2] Found February 24, 2003, attempting to access Mu Zimei's original blog on http://muzimei.blogone.net/temp/mzm.htm.

proliferating across multiple websites in an uncontrolled fashion. She explicitly listed her publishing agreements with various internet portals and asked that her rights to her written materials should be acknowledged.

In addition to economic issues, property rights are becoming the basis for more and more claims of citizen rights in China, and are a form of political action in which the state is most responsive to citizens' grievances (Davis & Lu 2003). Property rights are also an arena in which sexual rights are claimed and contested, including claims of ownership of one's intellectual property as in Mu Zimei's case, but more commonly, claims of ownership of personal space, such as one's own home, one's body, or space in a hotel room rented for with one's own money. Property is a powerful rhetorical tool in contemporary China, allowing one to place oneself outside the boundaries of conventional politics, and thus are a kind of disguised political claim. In the case of the Mu Zimei phenomenon, however, we can also see how a weak regime of intellectual property rights can allow the proliferation of her texts across the internet, weakening state controls over dissident discourse, as well as the author's control over her social identity.

Sexual Rights as Citizen Responsibilities

In response to the "Mu Zimei phenomenon", the young company Blog China issued a "Bloggers Code of Ethics", aimed to protect "netizens" in the "blogger community". These guidelines included: (1) honesty and integrity, including respect for intellectual property rights; (2) minimizing harm to others, including protecting others' privacy; (3) being responsible to the blogger community (Blogchina.com 2003).

The "blogger's code of ethics" highlights a right to privacy, but interpretations in this case differ. Mu Zimei claimed to have been engaging in her private pursuits of sexual experimentation and journal writing, private activities which were disrupted first by the enormous voyeuristic interest in her diary, then by direct state censorship. Her critics, however, argued that she systematically violated the rights to privacy of the men whose names she published in her blog. As Plummer points out, citizenship rights also entail responsibilities, and even many of Mu Zimei's supporters agreed that she failed in her responsibilities to protect the privacy of others, thus not living up to her obligations to the blogger community (Plummer 2003).

The Politics of Women's Sexual Agency on the Internet Before and After Mu Zimei

"We really have to thank Mu Zimei for one thing, and that is making blogs popular in China", (a foreign affairs officer in a Chinese government research institute).

To understand the ways in which Mu Zimei was read and the impact she had, it is helpful to consider the larger context in which the Mu Zimei phenomenon occurred and some of the subsequent developments online. First, conventional print media and literature already provided an initial framework for the interpretation of Mu Zimei. Mu Zimei was often compared to the autobiographical novels of the "pretty women writers" such as Mian Mian (1999), Wei Hui (1999) and Jiu Dan (2001) and the numerous printed collections of women's personal sexual stories collected by Chinese journalists (see An 1999; Wang Ruoxi 2003; Li Zechun 1999). Foreign television dramas such as "Sex and the City" also contributed to the cultural mix in which her blog was received. In this context, she was seen as hoping to profit from a booming trade in "ordinary" young women's sexual stories. However, Mu Zimei also stood out from these previous print-based writers for her use of the new possibilities of online media.

Mu Zimei's blog differed from sexual discussions in the print media in at least three major respects. First, it was more sexually explicit than most print novels, although some novels, such as Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby* also contained explicit scenes. In general, the internet has created a more sexually explicit public sexual culture. Second, the blog as a genre was much more "immediate" or "realistic", both in its overt autobiographical voice and in its organization as a diary of prosaic events. As a written genre, the blog is closer to language of everyday experience than the more stylized narratives of fiction, and in a sense more "political" because of this aura of realism. Third, the online format allows for immediate response from readers. The internet is thus much more "heteroglossic", dialogic or multi-vocal than other media.

Mu Zimei is still associated with blogging in China. Despite her temporary banishment from the Chinese media, the now famous Mu Zimei was hired in 2005 by blogging host Bokee.com to promote the site (McDonald 2005). There were an estimated 20.8 million blogs online in China at the end of 2006, of which 3.15 million were said to be active (Chinadaily.com 2007). Mu Zimei has many imitators. A brief discussion of some of the more famous women

sex bloggers reveals some subsequent trends. First, a middle school teacher from Fujian who went by the handle of "Zhuying Qingmu" posted a series of romantic essays together with artistic nude photographs of herself on her blog (Qinqinjiayuan 2004). A woman using the name "Hooligan Yan" also posted erotic photos and texts describing her sexual liaisons (Liumangyan 2004). "Big Sister Furong" became a popular sensation for her blog of photos, personal stories and her descriptions of her sexual attractiveness (Dazhongwang 2006). Internet novelist "Qin Dai" became famous for posting pictures of her naked buttocks while comparing herself to Kafka (Shan 2006). "Hairong Tiantian" used her blog to ask men to send photos of their naked lower bodies, while also posting erotic photos of herself (sz.net 2006). Another blogger "A Zhen" became famous for posting a diary of her life as a mistress in Shenzhen along with some sexy photographs of herself (Tao 2007b). Finally, Mu Zimei herself stayed in the news, including her podcasting of sound files of herself having sex and online advertisement for a marriage partner who could accept the idea of an open marriage (Mu 2007; Sina.com 2006).

Though their sexual explicitness was surpassed by more widely available but illegal pornography, what excited a reaction was that these bloggers were presumably ordinary women expressing their own sexual desires and interests. These bloggers became part of a public conversation that included both mainstream media voices as well as anonymous online postings to bulletin boards. These debates may be said to have redefined discussions about women's *sexual agency* – that means women employ to enjoy and express sexual desire – but equally significantly about what sort of woman are qualified to represent themselves publicly as *sexual agents*.

The issue of sexual agency revolves around the types of relationships and self-representations through which men and women can legitimately express sexual feelings. During the reform era women and youth struggled to legitimate sexuality within a loving committed relationship other than marriage. Whether before marriage or outside marriage, the key legitimating discourse became one of romantic feelings (Farrer 2002, 2006; Farrer & Sun 2003). Now some women such as Mu Zimei, Hooligan Yan and A Zhen were openly pursuing sexual fulfillment in relationships that violate or stretch this standard of romantic love. Mu Zimei stands out from earlier novelists by clearly advocating sex without love. Now a name that requires no introduction, "Mu Zimei" has become an allegorical figure – or a foil – for ordinary netizens to stake out their own

positions on permissible forms of sexual agency.

Women sex bloggers also have broadened the definition of who qualifies as a legitimate agent of sexual revolution in China. The gender of these public sexual agents is a key issue in these discussions. Mu Zimei herself denies speaking for women. In her email reply to my questions, she wrote,

> I say that my gender consciousness is not strong, because any time I do something, I don't first think that I am a woman. If I want to do it, I just do it.

In particular, she rejects definitions of "women's sexuality" that restrict women's sexual desire to relationships based on "love". Based in the body, sex is fundamentally an individual matter, not a gendered one. Regardless of her claims, the public responded to Mu Zimei as a gendered individual. Some participants in the dialogue found support for women's sexual autonomy in her stories. Other comments expressed doubts about Mu Zimei's gendered identity, questioning whether she spoke for women because she acted like a man and didn't have the external qualities of a desirable feminine women. Thus Mu Zimei, who refused to speak for women, was criticized for not being like a woman, but she also successfully challenged previous conventions of "Chinese woman's" sexual voice.

In many cases the critiques of women bloggers were less overtly moralistic than aesthetic. In sum, while novelists such as Wei Hui and Mian Mian made their claims to sexual agency as educated "pretty women writers", Sister Furong and Hooligan Yan provided visual self-representations that did not seem to live up to elite literary standards or commercial media standards of female beauty. They were not literary or educated enough for elite tastes. Criticisms of Sister Furong frequently revolved around her looks (Wikipedia 2007). A critical posting described Hooligan Yan with the following disparaging details:

> From her pictures, this is not a young face, a thick nose with a short flat bridge, with the light imprints of glasses she has just removed, thick lips painted with bright red lipstick, her eyebrows rising slightly, making one eye look larger than the other, and one tattooed eyebrow higher than the other. Her neck is a little short, and not suited to the tight goose-yellow sweater. Looking at the forehead beneath her none-too-clean, and obviously dyed hair, I cleaned off my computer screen, but it was not dust, it was wrinkles. (Liu 2005)

Many notable female bloggers such as A Zhen, Hairong Tiantian, Sister Furong and Hooligan Yan were working-class, middle-aged or rural-to-urban migrants.

Their sometimes obvious deviations from the intellectual, aesthetic, and fashion standards of the urban elite made them the brunt of jokes – though still objects of sexual prurience and commercial interest. In some ways the internet has allowed socially marginal women to act as public sexual agents, but they also faced the hegemonic aesthetic and moral standards of urban, intellectual elites. In the dialogic sexual politics of the internet, however, unlike traditional media, women who don't fit the dominate standards are allowed to argue back and put forth themselves as sexual subjects (and objects) with their own desires and standards of self-appreciation.

Querulous Netizens and the Diminishing Authority of Experts

The Mu Zimei phenomenon shows that the story of the internet sexual revolution is not merely one of sexual radicals – or sexual entrepreneurs – such as Mu Zimei pushing the boundaries of government censorship. It is also one in which both "official" and non-official voices attempt to participate in defining a sexual "civilization" that also includes their own more conservative definitions of sexual rights and responsibilities. In the long run, neither sexual radicals nor legitimate "experts" may end up dominating this discursive space.

Perhaps the clearest example of the power of conservative netizen voices in public discussions of sexuality is the conservative reaction against Li Yinhe. In January 2007 Li Yinhe used her blog to advocate the rights of people to engage in "spouse swapping". The background was a case in which a police woman was fired from her job for engaging in spouse swapping. Li argued that the woman did not violate the principles of "free will, privacy, and being an adult" and shouldn't be punished (Tao 2007a). Mu Zimei wrote in support of Li's theory, as did some ordinary netizens. One blogger wrote, "Life should be full of variety [. . .]. I am all for it: practice changing partners to the limit!" (Wang Shun 2006). However, many more netizens criticized Li Yinhe's views on blogs and bulletin board postings. Some appealed to traditional Chinese morality. One posting wrote: "How can society tolerate sexual promiscuity? How can society tolerate changing partners?" (Jinqiusuoguo 2007). A typical anonymous comment to a blogger's bulletin board read: "Isn't swapping partners just swapping husbands and wives? People today are really messed up, why don't they go ahead and have sex with animals?" (Wang Shun 2006). In general criticism of Li Yinhe seemed

more common than support, as was the case with Mu Zimei earlier.[3]

Li Yinhe's wife-swapping defense, her arguments for decriminalization of prostitution and her repeated attempts to propose legislation for same-sex marriage all received tremendous media attention, and may have lead to the pressure from "not-ordinary citizens" (or high government officials) to "shut her mouth" as she put it (Li Yinhe 2007). Still, some netizens rushed to defend Li Yinhe. One blogger who had been moved by Li Yinhe's writings on homosexuality wrote:

> To sum up, her ideas represent humanism. They represent the liberal democratic universal love that some people are always afraid of. Professor Li has done so very much for homosexuals. This is difficult in a society that lacks democratic freedoms and doesn't allow people to speak the truth. You could say that Professor Li is the most powerful representative of Chinese homosexuals, and a brave soldier on the road to Chinese democracy. (Tong 2007)

Such defenders urged Li not to retreat from public life. One wrote, "Dr. Li, you have to stiffen your resolve!" (Shiwaxingge 2007).

Some of the strongest support for Li came not from anonymous netizens but from voices associated with academia and traditional print media who were bothered about the implications of Li's retreat for speech freedom. A widely quoted article in the *Southern Metropolis Daily* argued:

> Clearly, if Li Yinhe's voice can be so easily suppressed then the interests and right to speak of all those who curse her [for her views] will be difficult to safeguard, and the voices they wish to hear might suffer similarly [. . .]. Protecting freedom of expression necessarily means we will have to hear some voices we don't particularly like. This is a necessary price to be paid for freedom. If we must choose between "hearing both those voices we like and those we don't" and "hearing absolutely nothing", we should opt for the former. (Bandurski 2007)

Significantly, not all netizens accepted Li Yinhe's authority in sexual matters. Unwilling to be labeled "feudalistic" or "backward" some critics of Li Yinhe attacked her narrative of sexual progress and her authority as an "expert" in matters of

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[3] I didn't attempt a true quantitative analysis. There were postings both supportive and critical of Li on http://blog.daqi.com/article/59847.html, http://wangshun.blog.hexun.com/6311576_d.html, and http://blog.sina.com.cn/u/5394fdf7010008b6.

sexuality. One blogger complained that society had long accepted people's rights to engage in sexual behaviors such as homosexuality and extramarital affairs:

> These things have gone on for a long time, and no has actively interfered. The judicial system mostly concerns itself with prostitution. But Li Yinhe is always talking about the intolerant treatment people received in the old society. It only shows that she is living in the past, and can't see the civilization of the current society. The biggest joke is that she always sees her self as civilized, and everyone who is against her is barbaric [. . .]. You shouldn't think just because you have drunk a little western ink, that all Chinese are idiots. (Zuiyankansha 2007)

This blogger pointedly criticizes Li Yinhe for not understanding current social realities, describing her as "old and backwards" and living off taxpayer money while not responding to public demands. Those who opposed such practices as "wife swapping" need not frame themselves as upholders of tradition, but rather as defining their own version of sexual modernity. One sensed in these comments that younger netizens were satisfied (or complacent) with the space of sexual freedoms that now existed by 2007, and did not feel beholden to the authority of those who struggled to advocate such freedoms in the 1980s and 1990s. Although providing much greater exposure and freedom of expression, the internet also deprives "experts" such as Li Yinhe of the rhetorical privilege they enjoyed in the print media. In online discourse, it is increasingly clear that the Chinese civil society will not be monopolized by the voices of liberal "netizens" (Tsui 2005) radicals or experts. Indeed the most aggressive attacks on women bloggers come not from state censors but from conservative "netizens" who wished to uphold sexual standards they described as threatened by sex radicals such as Mu Zimei. The continuing debate suggests that the battle for sexual pluralism on the internet is not lost, but no consensus on sexual rights should be expected to arise out of these debates.

Conclusion: A Dialogic Approach to Sexual Citizenship in China

On the surface the stories of Mu Zimei and Li Yinhe are both cautionary tales about the limits of citizenship rights in China. Despite guarantees in the Chinese constitution of freedom of speech, personal freedom and the right to engage in literary artistic and cultural pursuits, Mu Zimei was banned from publishing her book in the PRC and vilified in the state-controlled media. Li Yinhe was pressured

to limit her speech on sexual issues. Both cases clearly shows the arbitrariness of state guarantees of rights in China (Yu 2002) and the limits of speech on the Chinese internet (Giese 2004). A dialogic conception of sexual politics, however, points to the alternative and dissident positions that were staked out in the public conversations about Mu Zimei, including liberal advocacy of rights to free expression, natural rights, property rights, women's rights and rights to privacy. Even her critics acknowledged many of these rights. A dialogic conception of public culture takes notice of these shifting grounds of agreement that underlie or emerge within public disagreements.

As many Chinese media observers pointed out, more important than the positive arguments of Mu Zimei and her defenders was the social process of the debate itself. Although scholars such as Li Yinhe faced public criticisms, their writings defending Mu Zimei were not removed from state-owned websites. Moreover, critics were drawn into a public debates in which they had to acknowledge the arguments of Mu Zimei's defenders, and fight for the agreement and sympathy of skeptical "netizens" (*wangmin*). In the end, even the most vociferous critics of Mu Zimei, such as *China Youth* editor Peng Bo and columnist Li Zhongzhi, agreed that an unmarried woman such as Mu Zimei had a right to pursue her own sexual affairs privately, acknowledging that this was a right not available to a young woman two decades earlier.

A dialogic perspective also allows us to contextualize the seemingly confusing uses of social constructionist and essentialist conceptions of sexuality in arguing for sexual rights. Many conservative critics embraced a social constructivist position, pointing to public disapproval of sexual behaviors such as casual sex, extramarital sex, and spouse swapping, while acknowledging that standards might be different elsewhere in the world. Faced with these normative and usually nativistic arguments, defenders of sexual liberties often resorted to a rhetorical claim that sex is "natural" and thus should not be repressed regardless of social norms or national customs. As Li Yinhe's recourse to a natural rights discussion illustrates, a discourse of nature allows defenders of sexual rights to argue against definitions of "social morality" and "Chineseness" based on a strong social consensus. As a scholar Li Yinhe advocates a social constructionist Foucauldian perspective (Li Yinhe 2000), but politically she finds the essentialist position useful. For Mu Zimei, the naturalness of sex is her primary defense against her socially powerful critics. Conservatives were not willing to surrender "nature" to the liberals, nor did liberals concede the "social". "Nature" and

"society" are paired terms in these divergent arguments about sexual acts and agency, and both liberals and conservatives alternately appealed to both.

As described above, the Mu Zimei phenomenon was a debate about the criteria for sexual citizenship in China. One key term was sexual morality. Not only do we find contending standards of sexual morality, but differing conceptions of what morality in fact is. For Mu Zimei and some of her supporters, morality is a set of irrational rules that have little or nothing to do with natural sexual needs. For some orthodox critics of Mu Zimei, morality is a category explicitly tied to the political leadership of the Communist Party. For them, censorship is a legitimate defense of public morality, a role the party has claimed for itself since the 1940s. For many ordinary critics of Mu Zimei, however, the moral codes they most frequently refer to are personal standards such as "feelings", "love" and "beauty". These are both ethical and aesthetic categories, some of which are presumed to have particularly Chinese characteristics. For these critics, Mu Zimei's writings are not so much politically incorrect, as aesthetically unacceptable. Debates about sexual citizenship are also debates about sexual aesthetics (and ethics) and vice versa. For many readers, the most damning charge against Mu Zimei was that her stories were ugly. As Peng Bo stated, Chinese women are expected to write "beautiful" stories of love. Disparaging comments on women bloggers Hooligan Yan and Sister Furong also focused on their failure to fit normative standards of feminine beauty and literary style. On the other hand, we might argue that the popularity of such bloggers has expanded the range of public representations of women's sexuality, challenging conventional aesthetics.

In conclusion, this discussion shows the usefulness of a dialogic notion of sexual politics for understanding the sex debates on the Chinese internet. Regardless of her initial claims to be engaging in a private practice of journal writing, Mu Zimei instigated a series of antagonist dialogues about gender norms, sexual morality, and sexual rights. Within these debates, positions were articulated, defended or assumed that neither side had necessarily intended to support when the discussion began. In this process we should not reduce "official" or "state" voices to the role of censor. Some of Mu Zimei's strongest support came from Li Yinhe, who works for a leading state think tank. Even Mu Zimei's "traditional media" critics acknowledged a wide range of sexual rights denied by the state only a few years earlier. Finally, the interest in Mu Zimei and Li Yinhe clearly extends beyond issues of sexuality. One of the more

interesting debates surrounding Li Yinhe was whether to accept her claims that her writings were "apolitical". Citing the authority of Michel Foucault on the relationship of sexual discourse to tactics of power, an editorialist in the *Southern Metropolitan Daily* – the paper that had vociferously defended Li the day before – wrote that it would be disingenuous for Li to separate sexuality from political claims (reported in Bandurski 2007). Supporters of Li Yinhe also made the same point from the opposite political direction, arguing that she was a defender not only of sexual rights, but of free speech rights and democratic progress generally. Far from being a commercialized distraction from "real politics" we find that sex talk on the internet has become an arena in which actors discussed political issues such as free speech, human rights and the rule of law behind this thin veil of a "depoliticized" topic.

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