

When *Paper Puppy* Meets *Beijing Doll*:

Reading Adolescent Female Sexuality in Two Chinese Youth Novels

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ABSTRACT

Paper Puppy (2000) by Yin Jianling and *Beijing Doll* (2002) by Chun Sue are often considered landmark works of Chinese adolescent literature. Since their publication, both novels have inspired discussions about sex in fiction for young audiences. However, Yin's novels received critical acclaim whilst Chun's work was banned months after its debut. Taking the novels' discrepant reception as a starting point, this article explores the contexts of their production and traces the two different, yet intersecting, writing traditions they emerge from: *qingshaonian wenxue* (adolescent literature), predominantly authored by adults for an adolescent readership, and *qingchun wenxue* (youth literature), often associated with teenage authors who write about their own lives. Although authors of *qingshaonian wenxue* and *qingchun wenxue* alike grapple with depictions of adolescent sexuality, the former is habitually regarded as conservative and cautious when it comes to matters of sex whilst the latter appears radical and rule-breaking. Comparative analysis reveals the complexities in *Paper Puppy*'s supposed conformity and *Beijing Doll*'s ostensible iconoclastic bent, showing

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that the novels are characterised by both subversions and limitations. This article builds on previous work, such as that by Chen Li and Lisa Chu Shen, to tease out the multifaceted sexual politics in Chinese YA, revealing that representing teen sexuality honestly and responsibly in the Chinese YA publishing scene remains challenging for today's authors.

INTRODUCTION

The topics of adolescent sex and sexuality have traditionally been absent from Chinese cultural conversation. I remember growing up with little access to books that taught me about my body, as a teenager in China in the early 2000s. I learned about the mysteries of sex via movies and purple passages in adult magazines. Indeed, in turn-of-the-millennium-China, young readers might have found it difficult to locate books that include what Amy Pattee calls “erotic or sexually explicit” contents, that which “contextualize[s] sexuality by providing details not just of the sex act, but also of the emotional component of intimacy and by encoding these descriptions in a language that is not clinical but affective” (30, 36). Whilst most novels that Chinese teen readers had access to at that time shied away from explicit sexual references, several did bring teenage sexuality to the mainstream, including *Paper Puppy* (2000/2019)¹ by Yin Jiangling and *Beijing Doll* (2002/2004)² by Chun Sue. The former was written in 1999, when Yin, in her late twenties, had already become a published children's novelist. First published in 2000, *Paper Puppy* was reprinted in four different editions thereafter; the latter completed by the author in 2000, when Chun was 17, and published in 2002, when she was 19.

Both books reached a wide teenage readership and garnered considerable popular and critical attention. Yin's *Paper Puppy* tackles the messiness of youth physiology directly with its detailed descriptions of a shy, sensitive girl's relationship with her growing body. Pre-marital sex, menstruation, or teenage pregnancy – once taboo topics for young readers – all find a place in *Paper Puppy*. Chun's *Beijing Doll* begins with its female protagonist, Lin Jiafu, recounting her love affairs with various men during her final year of middle school – “sweet, tattered, baffling and dizzying”, as she puts it – the time of youth (1). Referring to her dates by numbers and codes rather than by name, the young urban rebel juggles an oppressive student life and daring escapades into rock 'n roll subculture. While Lisa Chu Shen suggests that, “among children's authors who grappled with the conflicts and implications of girlhood in the turbulent decades of the late twentieth century, no writer ventured as far as Yin did in her bold representation of adolescent female sexualities” (379), both novels place female

1 Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this article regarding this book and its paratextual sources are mine.

2 The edition used in this article is an official English version, translated by Howard Goldblatt and published in 2004 by Abacus.

sexuality at the forefront: it defines the protagonists' experiences and influences their coming-of-age trajectories.

Despite their shared attention to the realities of adolescent sexual behaviour, the novels were received differently upon their publication. Both books have been said to attract the eye of the public and exert considerable impact on young readers, but *Paper Puppy* received substantially more critical praise than Chun's debut. Considered to be "the first young adult bildungsroman" in China, *Paper Puppy* has been recognised by gatekeepers for its unique literary value ("*Paper Puppy: Bildungsroman* by Yin Jianling", n.p.). Conversely, *Beijing Doll* suffered from a harsh ban only months after its initial publication in 2002, likely due to its portrayal of youth sexuality in ways regarded as "deviant" or "unconventional" (Chun vii). The authors also reacted differently to the reception of their work. Yin admitted that she had not expected the critical acclaim accorded to her novel, which soon became her signature piece ("The Book That Made My Name"). Meanwhile, Chun wrote in the preface of *Beijing Doll*, not without a hint of regret, that the ban "stung" her and got her thinking about the international outreaching potential of her work (vii). Given the overlaps between Yin's and Chun's contemporaneous works, I ask: why was the former crowned with praise while the latter bore the brunt of controversy?

In this article, I use this question as a starting point to examine the differences and similarities between these landmark works. Past research, such as that by Chen Li, Lijun Bi and Xiangshu Fang, and Shen has examined representations of gender and sexuality in Chinese children's and YA novels, such as Yin's *Orange Fish* (2007), *Tomboy Dai An* (2010) by Yang Hongying, and *Sixteen-Year-Old Girl* (2011) by Qin Wenjun. Yet, little attention has been paid to *Beijing Doll*. By comparing *Paper Puppy* and *Beijing Doll*, I intend to shed additional light on the intricate landscape of female adolescent sexuality, as it is described and negotiated in Chinese YA. In the first section, I map the contexts of the two novels' production, giving particular attention to contesting attitudes towards sex shared by youths and the state. I also identify how Yin's and Chun's novels emerge from two different, yet intersecting, writing traditions prevalent at the time – *qingshaonian wenxue* (adolescent literature), predominantly authored by adults for an adolescent readership, and *qingchun wenxue* (youth literature)³, often associated with teenage authors who write about their own lives – to argue that these traditions influenced the authors' representations of sex in their books and led to different responses from critics. In the second section, I reveal some of the complex aspects of sexual discourses that have been obscured or eclipsed by the somewhat polar critical reception that the authors received. *Paper Puppy's* supposed conformity is accompanied by its inconspicuous subversions: namely, its explorations of the heroine's non-normative sexual fantasies; while *Beijing Doll's* iconoclastic tendencies are complicated

3 "Qingchun" is literally translated into "youth" in English, but it refers more specifically to the time of youth rather than to young people (Zhao). Thus, "qingchun wenxue" literally means literature about the youth experience.

by a paradoxical precariousness when the narrator (as well as the teen author) attempts to voice her sexual identity and agency. My findings suggest that, whilst these books contribute to a generative, nuanced, and comprehensive understanding of representations of sex in Chinese juvenile fiction, their unsuccessful probing into the practical pleasures and hurdles of healthy heterosexual intimacy no longer speak to the needs of a Chinese youth readership in today's digital, globalised landscape.

TACKLING THE THORNY MATTER OF SEX: SITUATING THE SEXUAL POLITICS OF CHUN AND YIN

Since the early Republican period of the 1920s, modernising elites, reformers, and intellectuals have frequently raised the topic of adolescent sex education. Tracing the debates surrounding modern and contemporary sex pedagogies in China, Alessandra Aresu explains that Chinese sex education is part of “a particular discursive mechanism” that aims to produce “healthy and moral bodies through warnings and negative imperatives” (2). Such imperatives, Aresu claims, are associated with how the healthy adolescent body relates to the construction of national strength and modernisation. Mainly controlled by the state, adolescent sex education developed from valorising a scientific approach to teaching sexual knowledge in the Republican period; to enforcing attitudes of abstinence and reticence to sex during the 1950s through much of the 1970s; to the renewed interest in sex education in the 1980s, with an added focus on youth sexual morality.

With Deng Xiaoping's opening-up policy⁴ in 1978, youths who came of age during the 1980s and early 1990s grew up navigating the gap between Chinese conventions and Western values. They were “ambushed by the powerful invasion of globalization”, through which they have come to embrace “the fast materialization of their lives” (Nie 205). Around the 1990s, by which time Chun was writing *Beijing Doll*, sex had morphed into a lifestyle, rather than a taboo, for some urban youths. Elaine Jeffreys and Haiqing Yu aptly describe a youth-led sexual revolution during this period, characterised by a growing tolerance towards non-normative or premarital sexual behaviours, and a tendency to link sex with self-expression and self-exploration (136). For many youths, then, openly exploring their sexualities was not an embarrassment but a vital part of their pursuit of personal freedom and an individualised identity.

The tension between some youths' desires for sexual liberation and the state's stringent controls on adolescent sexual behaviour is reflected in the production of *Paper Puppy* and

4 China's opening up policy in 1978 initiated “market-based economic reforms” with a political imperative to “opening up to the rest of the world” (Jeffreys and Yu 47). The policy marked China's rapid urbanization and economic boost, while also spurring new changes in how sex and sexuality are perceived in public discussions (48).

Beijing Doll, specifically concerning the writing traditions that these books led and/or participate in. When Chun's novel was reintroduced into the Chinese publishing market after being banned around 2002, the author was named one of the leaders of the post-80s generation of youth literature authors. Youth literature (*qingchun wenxue* [青春文学])⁵ refers to a genre which germinated in the late 1990s with Yu Xiu, then a teenager, publishing her first novel *Seasons of Blossom and Seasons of Rain* (1996), which became an instant hit. In 1999, a Chinese literary magazine, *Embryo* (*Meng Ya* [萌芽]), initiated the "New Concept National Composition Contest" and, from there, a group of literary-minded youths achieved fame before embarking on careers as professional writers. Their writings reflected the increasing desire among contemporary youths to explore their emerging sexuality. Often starting as confessional accounts of adolescent turmoil, *qingchun wenxue* is characterised by sharp defiance of the state's tight hold upon all aspects of adolescent life. With its radical questioning of the adult-imposed social order, *qingchun wenxue* became a hugely lucrative market category that sold well among teens but simultaneously found fault with adult critics. As works of *qingchun wenxue* gained their own market category, they challenged the definition of children's and adolescent literature, not least because they were generally penned by adolescents and addressed so-called adult concerns, such as sex.⁶

This may account for a general lack of scholarly attention to *qingchun wenxue*, including *Beijing Doll*, but young writers of *qingchun wenxue* can be seen to be at the vanguard of a literary revolution where past reticence about sex is broken. As one of the leading authors of *qingchun wenxue*, Chun daringly dissected her teen sex life in *Beijing Doll* despite possible controversy. Initially drawn from a series of journal entries composed when the author was only 13 years old,⁷ the novel's writing process reflects the author's own

5 In China,, the term youth literature (*qingchun wenxue*) has multiple meanings. It is often associated with post-80s writers who were in their teens when they rose to fame for their writings in the 1990s, and it is mainly this aspect of *qingchun wenxue* that I discuss in this article. But one must also note that Chinese *qingchun wenxue* has also intimate connections with a group of authors who gained popularity by writing cyber literature, with most of them categorized as school stories and chit lit. These stories about adolescent romance were avidly consumed by teenagers despite their lack of literary merit (as some scholars point out).

6 Scholars have responded dismissively to the popularity of this burgeoning youth authorship in early 21st-century China. First-generation children's literature scholar Wang Quangen, for instance, decries the works by these teen authors as "unsettling [...] neither fully 'adultlike' or 'childlike' in style (qtd. in Zhang 233). While Wang's response exemplifies scholars' reluctance to engage with these works critically and their ensuing uncertainty when it comes to placing the quasi-juvenilia oeuvre of writers like Chun, more recent scholarship from Tan Fengxia and Karen Coats has explored how adolescent novels written by adolescents can enrich definitions of adolescent literature.

7 The age of consent in China is 14 years old ("Age of consent by country 2022"), so while Chun finished the book at 17, some raw materials used in the novel were composed at a time when she did not reach the age of sexual consent. This might provoke some safeguarding concerns with

ongoing struggle to locate a mature sexual subjectivity. The frank, crude, and confessional style of Chun's fiction connects her to a group of women writers who garnered public attention in the 1990s with their explicit celebration of female sexual desires in their novels, such as Wei Hui (*Shanghai Baby* 1999) and Mian Mian (*Candy* 1997). Both writers published (at least partially) autobiographical novels about female sexual adventurism, starkly refusing the norms of sexual restraint that characterized the Maoist period. According to James Farrer, writers like Wei and Mian celebrate women's sexual pleasure and sexual rebellion in ways that attracted youths of the period, who, by then, were no longer interested in politicised moral tales instilled in them by the state (35). Because of their sexually explicit best-sellers, these writers became representatives of a trend of body writing. Their candid examinations of physical desire, effectuated through embodied sexual ventures, pointed to a larger collective search for personal sexual identity among youths, a search that has since been heavily informed by Chun's writing. Yet Chun's young age simultaneously differentiated her from these adult women and complicated her role as an attractive, yet controversial, icon in the emerging literary and cultural conversation around adolescent sexuality in late 20th-century China.

Though the period was informed by the progressive voices of a youth sexual revolution, which shaped the sexual frankness of teenage writers of *qingchun wenxue* such as Chun, young people – especially girls – continued to experience the persistent influence of traditional sexual values. Nicole Zarafoneti highlights “the complicated tensions that have emerged for young women as a result of the continuing pull of tradition and the new demands of the reform period”: issues such as “sex education, premarital sex, dating, partner choice and marriage are all matters which young women must now carefully consider in the context of the new market economy” (1). Whilst seen as emerging consumers and embodiments of contemporary sexual mores, female adolescents continued to endure discourses of appropriate sexual conduct advocated by parents, teachers, and gatekeepers of the state. Indeed, Harriet Evans postulates that the more open and individualist rhetoric surrounding youth sexuality in the 1980s had not fundamentally obliterated “the appropriation of adolescent sexuality as a site of supervision and control” (80). Adult commentators continued to express qualms regarding “the sexual permissiveness” of contemporary youths, which were then associated with deviant juvenile behaviour such as crime (80-81).

Such consternation has also been reflected in Chinese adolescent literature (*qingshaonian wenxue* [青少年文学]). To borrow Pattee's definition of young adult literature, *qingshaonian wenxue* broadly refers to books “written primarily by adults for an audience of young people between the ages of 12 and 18” (30). Unlike the sassy post-80s teen authors of *qingchun wenxue*, many of the adults who wrote for young audiences during the 1990s, such

regards to the novel's depictions of teenage sex that happened before – or shortly after – the character reached the age of consent.

as Yin, were born during the 1970s, before the end of the Cultural Revolution and the implementation of the Reform and Opening-up Policy, and before sex education debates tailored to the young had fully emerged. It was only after she reached adulthood and looked back upon her teenage life that Yin realised the problems she faced negotiating her sexual maturation in an environment where matters of sex were inadequately discussed and sex education was scarcely available to all girls. This retrospective lens was shared by many more authors of *qingshaonian wenxue*, such as her contemporaries Chen Danyan and Qin, leading them to draw heavily on their own experiences of sexual maturation, whilst also searching for a kind of writing that could teach teenage readers about sex without reverting to the didactic, heavily ideological gender discourse during the Maoist Period.

Although adult authors including Yin were often committed to a less didactic way of talking about sex, they nevertheless align with the state in their anxieties over young people's unregulated sexuality. As such, Yin's works typically acknowledge the messy realities of adolescent female sexuality whilst problematising them as issues that require adult guidance.⁸ When it comes to representing adolescent girls' sexual experiences, she writes:

It's more important to focus on the emotional aspect, the minute psychological landscape and feelings of love and attachment. This is the key area where adolescent literature differs from adult literature. Girls should be accepting of their bodies and love themselves. Growth means experiencing pain and acquiring rational understanding across one's confusion and ignorance. (Yin, "The Book That Made My Name" n.p.)

Yin's attention to aspects of emotional attachment, rather than to explicit portrayals of sexual behaviour, and her emphasis on girls' sexual development as a process whereby rational understanding is acquired, seem to reiterate her awareness of the limits and functions of the YA genre. They also speak to her efforts to patrol the boundaries of appropriateness and taboo. As such, she is trusted by gatekeepers and subsequently publicised as "the ferryman for youth" – someone who assists the young person across the turbulent waters of adolescence (Peng n.p.).

Taking the above observations into account, it is perhaps easy to understand why the critical reception of *Beijing Doll* and *Paper Puppy* was so different. Writing as a forerunner of *qingchun wenxue* against the backdrop of the 1980s sexual revolution among urban youths, *Beijing Doll's* representation of female sexuality appealed to contemporary youth readers but was considered outrageous because it challenged adult notions of adolescence. On the other

8 The idea for *Paper Puppy*, Yin relates, came from her experience working as a mentor at an adolescent mental health helpline, where she met various girls who struggled because of the psycho-sexual confusions they underwent. One of her patients' experiences had been adapted into the novel to show the significance of adult guidance.

hand, Yin gained praise from adult critics because she held a conservative attitude – fulfilling pedagogical, aesthetic, and literary expectations of Chinese YA fiction – and chose to depict girls’ psycho-sexual growth without causing too much eyebrow-raising amongst adult gatekeepers. Given the novels’ discrepant reception, it would seem natural to assume that *Beijing Doll* displays more progressive sexual discourses than *Paper Puppy*, considering the sexual freedom versus sexual conservatism endorsed by the respective literary and generic traditions influencing the novels’ production. Yet, recent scholarship has complicated such a claim: for example, scholars have by pointed out the contradictory aspects of Chun’s resistance to gender norms (Qiao and Zheng), as well as highlighting how Yin encodes messages that challenge her alleged anti-feminist stance (Shen)⁹. Building on this work, I suggest that the complexity of both novels necessitates that we reappraise the somewhat oppositional feedback they receive from critics. The following sections delve into textual analysis to unpack the sexual discourses the two novels contain. My findings suggest that depictions of sex and sexuality in Chun’s and Yin’s fictions expose nuances, tensions, and ambiguities that challenge how the books are generally understood as singularly rebellious/conservative as per the literary traditions to which they belong. I will begin with *Beijing Doll* as the book’s controversial stance has made it a phenomenal product of its time. Unlike *Paper Puppy*, its rich public presence brought about more immediate curiosity and scrutiny, both from within and outside the literary sphere.

BEIJING DOLL: SEXUAL REBELLION AND ITS PARADOXES

In 2004, Chun became one of the first young writers in China to be featured in a cover story in *Time Magazine* (Asia). The cover title reads, “Breaking Out: China’s Youth Finally Dare to be Different”. The emphasis on difference is significant, as Chun has frequently been associated with the term *linglei* (Drissel 163), which literally translates into ‘the other species’ in English. As a cultural idea, *linglei* refers to an iconoclastic lifestyle that departs from conventional social expectations. Chun had an unconventional adolescence, having dropped out of high school and pursued an idiosyncratic passage of self-discovery through her immersion in poetry and rock music subculture. It is therefore unsurprising when we see Lin Jiafu, Chun’s affirmed alter ego and the 14-year-old heroine of *Beijing Doll*, relating her sexual practices with rawness and crude honesty. Feeling alienated and repressed by the

9 According to Shen, Yin, in many of her nonfiction work, valorizes traditional feminine qualities of purity, beauty, gentleness, and kindness, etc, calling them “the feminine essence” (380). Her support of male-female sexual difference often manifests in language that implicitly suggests, as Shen believes, “the familiar equation of the male with the stronger sex and the female with the weaker counterpart” (380). She refuses to be called a feminist and seems to have mixed feelings about the feminist cause of gender equality. This is why she has been considered by some scholars to hold an anti-feminist stance.

authoritarian school structure, Lin describes her school as “disgusting”, and the education system “ridiculous” (Chun ix). She refuses to euphemize sex and confesses her desires freely. “Going to bed with him seemed perfectly natural,” she declares, not long after she met the talented lead singer of band W, Zhao Ping (76). As suggested earlier, such candid stylistic traits are the marker of Chun’s writing. To be sure, the rawness and honesty of the narrator’s voice, which often manifests in her straightforward, sometimes blunt, revelation of her innermost thoughts and experiences, became the main reason for the novel’s reputation as a story of youth rebellion.

In many ways, Lin’s heedless references to sex align with her somewhat utopian vision of sex as a free, honest, mutually consenting activity. Earlier in the novel, Lin spells out her sex manifesto in a conversation with a male friend:

Actually, I think that the ideal sexual relationship would be like some of those American clubs, like The Sand Club, where everybody’s got the same spirit as everyone else, where everyone’s free, and they’re all sincere on a basic level, including nakedness and open relationships, so long as you don’t attack or force your will on others. No holding back, no concealment. (Chun 140)

Clearly, Lin’s understanding of sexual relationships is affected by the influx of Western ideas on the freedom, openness, and pleasure of sex. But her ideal vision betrays the fact that her rebelliousness is inseparable from her innocence¹⁰ – she remained innocent about love and sex, even as she became sexually active. As Lin tests out her notion of fulfilling sexual relationships after entering the adult world, she discovers that her ideal does not always work. Importantly, she realizes that a sincere open relationship is easier to imagine than to establish. For example, she has sexual intercourse for the first time without making an informed decision, which, considering her young age, raises concerns about the age of

10 The concept of innocence mentioned here deserves to be unpacked further. As Xu Xu (2013) notes, modern Chinese children’s literature, influenced by the child-centred pedagogies of John Dewey and the ideologies of Western romanticism, constructs the child as an innocent ideal citizen of the nation state. Early advocates of children’s literature championed the idea of the “child-heart”, a term suggesting that children possess essential qualities of “childness” – with innocence at its centre. But the call for constructing a type of innocent childhood exists alongside concerns for exposing the cruel realities of life to children. According to Ban Ma, in the late 20th century, figures of innocent fictional children gradually gave way to an interest in the adolescent experience (5-6). When writers and scholars refer to the innocence of the coming-of-age teen protagonists, they are exploring a type of innocence different from that of their earlier modern counterparts. This notion of innocence consists not so much of essential virtues such as sincerity, spontaneity, imagination, or pureness, but a kind of innocence partially exposed (or on the verge of exposure) to adult realities. For girl characters, their innocence is most often endangered by sexual knowledge – an innocence about to be lost. Chun’s protagonist also fits into this later model of innocence.

consent. This might also explain why adult readers and critics often find Lin's first sex scene both abrupt and problematic. In the first few chapters, Lin visits an arts student, Li Qi,¹¹ whom she has just met for the first time. In his house, Lin senses how "an ordinary, unspectacular morning" starts to "feel wrong" and that "things had already moved beyond my [her] control" (10). Vaguely aware of her current circumstances, Lin declares, "I love playing with danger" (10). Later, it is revealed that Lin lost her virginity:

"Blood," I said to him.

"Oh." He wiped it clean with some toilet paper, which he tossed on the floor. "How old are you?" he asked, as if it had just then occurred to him.

"Sixteen," I lied. Without saying a word, he lit a cigarette. He looked spent.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" I asked casually.

"Yes."

That blew me away. (Chun 11)

As this scene suggests, Lin had little knowledge of sex compared to Li Qi, whose unethical and problematic approach is apparent in his failures to gain explicit consent and to share that he already had a girlfriend until after their encounter. Chun's gritty description of the aftermath of Lin's virginal sexual activity emphasises the disjuncture between Lin's expectations and the reality of her rushed, short-lived, first sex. With the increasing openness towards imparting sexual knowledge to children, today's readers might readily identify how Lin is made a victim in this sexual encounter. But we must also remember that when Chun wrote *Beijing Doll*, state sex education was geared towards the prevention of masturbation, teenage pregnancy, and premarital sex, rather than sexual consent. Writing as a teenager on the cusp of the millennium, when discourses of sexual liberation flowed into China, Chun likely experienced the state's emphasis on sexual abstinence as a prohibition against a legitimate teen desire to enjoy sex freely. On the other hand, explicit instruction on issues ranging from "sex differences, reproduction and childbirth, sexual attraction, intimacy, the reproductive and urinary system, private body parts, the identification of sex predators, prevention of sexual abuse, and verbal skills for self-protection" were not in place to protect girls like her from being victimised during her bold sexual encounters (Chen M. n.p.). Therefore, when approaching *Beijing Doll*, it is crucial to take note of how Chun's

11 It is implied that Li Qi had already come of age by the time he had sex with Lin, but the latter clearly was underaged and did not reach – or had just reached – the age of consent in China.

attitudes towards sex at the time of writing influenced the action and position of the autobiographical narrator in the novel.

While Chun holds an open attitude towards sex, her novel nevertheless exposes a profound uncertainty towards how young women might achieve independent sexual subjectivity. Despite Lin's many sexual encounters, those experiences rarely reflect what Pattee describes as "the pair's gradual escalation of physical intimacy as both an increasing demonstration of their care for each other as well as a natural expression of legitimate physiological desire" (9). Pattee's description points to the kind of relationship based on a mature psychological understanding of love and sex; it suggests that achieving complete sexual subjectivity through such a relationship marks an adolescent's growth out of innocence into adulthood. However, Lin continues to have trouble uniting romantic love and sex and is ultimately caught between the trap of unrequited love and sexual desire, incapable of locating her sexual subjectivity through a healthy and intimate bond. After undergoing a series of failed relationships, the heroine ends the last chapter asking: "what was the point of love if everything turned out like this? [...] how could I understand the heart of a mature woman? I'd never had one" (222). Finally, she laments: "I hadn't done anything and didn't know how to do anything [...] the century had abandoned me, no longer certain of innocence, eternity, or happiness" (223). Here, it becomes clear that Lin's sexual identity crisis is accompanied by an existential crisis as she slips further into nihilism. By then, she has understood that her previous sexual rebellion was but another manifestation of her innocence, which she had learned to condemn because "innocence was nothing and could not be anything" (223). Lin's explorations of sex remain unresolved by the end of the novel, and disillusion with growing up – rather than her successful transition into adulthood – dominates *Beijing Doll*. Therefore, while Chun's novel is known for an explicit engagement with matters of sex, the text eventually complicates the relationship between sexual rebellion and sexual maturity.

The dilemma that Lin experiences is reason to rethink the perception of *Beijing Doll*, and perhaps the *qingchun wenxue* genre more broadly, as inherently subversive against traditionalist sexual discourse. Certainly, the genre represents adolescents' unequivocal desire to talk about sex in their own terms. However, *Beijing Doll* also reinforces traditional ideas pertaining to adolescence as a period of naivety and reveals the harms associated with teenage sex when consent and respect are not present: Chun's use of first-person narration demonstrates Lin's naivety and, though Lin exhibits a keen mixture of existentialism and nihilism, her philosophical inquiry only reminds her of her own powerlessness.

In some respects, Lin's position echoes, by and large, the experiences of her creator, bringing a further tinge of irony over the book's reputation as a (potential) challenge to the traditionalist sexual discourse. Chun's publishing success often obscures the fact that she was rendered (potential) victim by the publishers. Since her work is considered autobiographical, Chun's frank writings about her body are sold as literary commodities to

gain media attention and profit (Sun 46). The tendency to conflate Lin's experiences with Chun's past also brought about a keen public curiosity with Chun as a girl writer who dared to reveal her sex life under public scrutiny. Like many other teen writers of *qingchun wenxue*, Chun has been valorised conveniently as a teen rebel, only to serve commercial interests, as demonstrated by the international publication agenda of *Beijing Doll*. Despite taking pains to package Chun as a daring youth icon, the cover design of *Beijing Doll* by Abacus nevertheless betrays the irony: featuring a painting of the author/heroine looking undaunted into the eyes of the readers, holding a cigarette in one hand, the bright peach-red covers, the stereotypical pink makeup upon her cheeks and the thin vest exposing her youthful body ironically reinforces the girl's status as a sexualized object within the broader cultural discourse that she had tried to challenge with her writing. Overall, *Beijing Doll* dramatizes a teenager's complicated negotiations of sexual desires and dangers, revealing the obstacles and multi-layered implications of youths safely and independently expressing their sexuality. In comparison, *Paper Puppy*, an adult-authored book, is widely regarded as occupying a more authoritative and trusted position when it comes to teaching young people how to tackle the problems of puberty.

PAPER PUPPY'S QUESTIONABLE CLAIMS TO CONFORMITY

As a product of Yin's careful and long-term observation of adolescence as a period of turmoil and questions, *Paper Puppy* seems inevitably more didactic in its narrative intent than *Beijing Doll*. The protagonist of Yin's novel – a shy and sensitive middle-school girl named Su Liaoliao – appears the opposite of Chun's rebellious heroine. Unlike Lin, whose rejection of school life results in her involvement in an alternative sexual lifestyle, Su follows a conventional path of development, framed by education and family. Abiding by the rigorous codes of conduct advocated by the novel's adult characters, Su rarely commits any sexual adventure deemed inappropriate for her age. As Yin's first-person narrator admits retrospectively, "I have always been sorry for myself because I had obeyed the norms so faithfully, binding myself like a silkworm, suppressing my desires even if they aren't so bad [...]. It could be considered a kind of mental handicap, to some degree" (*Paper Puppy* 68). Yin's depiction of adolescent sexuality also differs from Chun's in notable ways. While Chun's protagonist engages overtly in sexual encounters, Yin's protagonist expresses the nuances of her psycho-sexual development via a series of private, self-oriented, or clandestine, practices. While Chun uses realistic language to depict sex, Yin adopts fantastic imagery to highlight the psychic dimensions of Su's sexual experiences.

Yin's approach to exploring teenage sexuality aligns *Paper Puppy* with what Christine Wilkie-Stibbs describes as "young adult fiction that resides in the *f eminine*" (76). Wilkie-Stibbs' conceptualisation of the *f eminine* postmodern mode in YA fiction highlights the field's

“tension between unity and disunity and between interiority and exteriority” (76). Yin’s work exhibits such tensions, so that whilst her character does nothing out of place, the “*féminine* postmodern textuality” that defines the girl’s coming-of-age experience opens up new ways for perceiving her sexual subjectivity as other than ‘conventional’, ‘normal’, or ‘fixed’. For Wilkie-Stibbs, the *féminine* in YA fiction often functions by first shattering the material landscape, mirroring the dissolving of language in the Symbolic and the construction of the *féminine* in the psychic realm (77). In this respect, Yin uses fantastic, dream-like passages, as well as heavily sensual and metaphoric language, to represent the young protagonist’s sexual subjectivity.

For instance, after secretly observing/touching her female cousin’s body, Su is filled with guilt and fear for her sudden burst of sexual curiosity. As she wallows in regret and confusion, Su falls into a trance where she recounts, “a mystic sound that seemed to have come from the depths of the void travelled through the air and fell on me. I stopped, trying to capture the small thread that formed a mesmerising electric surge that ran across my body. Just then, I saw The Gray Building” (Yin, *Paper Puppy* 47). As she follows the call of that sound, the familiar landscape of the city park breaks down and Su finds herself in a magic gray building where a beautiful lady, Dan Ni, awaits her. Throughout Yin’s novel, the young girl enters the psychic realm of “The Gray Building” every time she is sexually frustrated, jumping back and forth between the illusory and the real worlds. The slippery boundaries between the actual and the imagined function similarly to the *féminine* postmodern mode that Wilkie-Stibbs observes in Western YA, “juxtapose[ing] [...] absolute and unquestioned notions of truth and reality against an infinite play upon the ideas of ‘truth’ and ‘the real’ in multiple textual references to these terms that undermine any pretension to the stability that the words themselves convey” (78). It is in the liminal space between the real and unreal that Su’s transgressions are embedded, distancing the young female protagonist from her desires and disobediences.

Although Su’s troubled slippages between the physical and the imagined realm allow a glimpse into her suppressed desires, such desires are not often geared towards the opposite sex. Rather, male sexuality is often featured negatively in the mental fantasies of the adolescent protagonist. Discussing *Paper Puppy*’s representation of homoeroticism as a natural phase in adolescent sexual development, Shen points out that in the novel “‘queerness’ is always already there”, but that queerness¹² functions mainly through disarticulation (394). As Shen observes, Yin frames her character’s queer desires without explicitly suggesting “to what extent the homoerotic phase signals homosexuality as a sexual identity and orientation” (387). When she watches the female teacher she admires, Mu Xi, playing the piano in the music room, Su is attacked by a yearning for “that one day Mu Xi would hold her with those very hands, those soft hands, and hold her as a mother holds her

12 In Shen’s analysis, as in mine, queerness refers primarily to a lens in which to interpret *Paper Puppy*’s ambiguous homoeroticism and same-sex desire.

child” (Yin, *Paper Puppy* 100). Heavy with Oedipal connotations, this description of desire slips between a tender idolisation for motherly protection and a possessive longing for intimacy, but the true nature of this desire is never explicitly articulated.

Su’s sensitive, yet emotionally reserved, nature dramatizes the difficulty of categorizing her sexual experiences under fixed labels, as she declares: “I seem to be a bit ‘slow’ when it comes to matters of the heart [...] perhaps I am too stubborn, but I’ve always deemed it a foolish thing to express your innermost fondness for someone” (100). Yin is known for a proclivity to adopt metaphorically rich language in her portrayals of adolescent sexuality – a language of riddles to describe the riddles of youth. But in many cases, the refusal to articulate sexuality works in similar ways as the tendency to metaphorize. Both function as purveyors of possibility, allowing for non-normative sexual experiences to slip in between the lines. These disarticulated moments not only support Shen’s claim about the novels’ inherent accommodation of queerness, but also tacitly construct reading positions whereby young readers can choose to identify with the narrator’s uncertain desires, even if they remain liminal, mysteriously hidden, or shapeless. Resembling the “dark and beautiful renderings” of queer childhoods explored by Kathryn Bond Stockton in *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (1), Yin’s strategic detours about the protagonist’s sexual desires release the potential for a more open-ended inquiry about sex that sprouts sideways, rather than across a designated linear trajectory. Whilst Su speaks about her longings for adult females in vague terms, Su describes boys as “a group of incomprehensible creatures [...] I avoid them like they were sources of contagion” (Yin, *Paper Puppy* 71) – a language of explicit dislike, or even disgust. Throughout the novel, she had various visions about a swimming pool, where an unnamed boy attacks and pushes her into an abyss. Su confesses:

He has no clear image, he doesn’t speak, but he could let out fear. That fear makes me fall from a cliff. That fear pursues and tyrannises me like a beast. The feeling of fear is so heavy that it spreads from the tips of my fingers up to my body until it colonises my heart. (72)

Although the language is likewise metaphor-laden, the harsh, terrorising qualities of male sexuality and its association with sexual threat are clear. The fearful male hand, for instance, has been mentioned multiple times across Su’s narrative. In the second chapter, Su describes the P.E. teacher pinching her chin with hands “coarse and sticky [...] the palm stabbed my face as if it were overgrown with thistles” (36). In her dreams of the swimming pool, Su again feels a huge and deformed hand “aiming towards my belly, with fingers soft and versatile like the tentacles of an octopus” (45). Later in the novel, Su sees Qiuzi, a precocious girl in her class, dating a married man. Again, she observes the strange man taking her friend’s hand in his. It strikes her how Qiuzi’s hand “shivers slightly in his palm, the way a chick shivers

under the winter roof” (121). Here Yin’s language takes on an undeniably cautionary streak. By evoking the older man and the innocent girl pairing through the image of the chick under the winter roof, Yin echoes the negative assumptions regarding girls’ tendency towards premature sexual relationships (Evans 77).

So what should we make of Yin’s generous allowances for her heroine’s same-sex desires and her more incontrovertible claims towards the dangers of heterosexual connections? Shen argues that such tension highlights Su’s adolescent girlhood as essentially queer. However, I suggest that this approach limits the possibilities for young people to develop a positive and healthy perception of heterosexual intimacy. As Shen has mentioned, Yin’s insistence on advocating “the female essence” and her subsequent reliance on sexual differences between men and women profoundly affected her writing. In *Paper Puppy*, her portrayal of the ideal grown woman as kind, lovely, and beautiful is contrasted with the predatory, callous, and aggressive male, suggesting that for adolescent girls, homoerotic ties with mature women connote a sense of security, whilst heterosexual ties will ultimately fall into the risk formula.

As the narrative progresses, Su falls in love with her history teacher who, despite departing from the stereotypical depictions of negative male sexuality that populate the heroine’s other fantasies, nevertheless inspires in Su a sense of guilt and self-denial as she confesses her affections for the teacher: “I know, this is a horrible feeling, one that will cast me into the depths of hell. I know I must free myself from its chains, but my unconsciousness still revels in the seductive scenery of that deadly field of poppies” (151). Although Su’s denial of her possible homoerotic inclinations is also present at different parts of the novel, those “queer longings” have never really been seen as a threat for the teenage protagonist. By contrast, when Su decides, on her 20th birthday, to meet her history teacher for the final time and decline the possibility of a romantic partnership between them, she understands the decision to be a turning point in her life, one where “fate puts a test” to her maturity and rational judgment (164). Unlike the ambiguous treatment of the girl’s homoerotic detours, premature sexual or romantic involvement should be postponed decidedly so that the adolescent girl could truly overcome the risks and mature into full womanhood. In so doing, Yin again reiterates the state’s emphasis on girls’ responsibilities for sexual restraint. Although Yin repeatedly claims, through the mentorship of Dan Ni, that the emotional turbulence experienced by adolescent females is normal, she was unable to give her protagonist a fulfilling relationship with the opposite sex. As such, Yin did not, at her time of writing, launch a complete critique of “the continued construction of adolescence as a particularly [...] female problem”, one that refuses to acknowledge the strong hold of sexual difference and gender hierarchy (Evans 64).

REPRESENTING SEX FOR CHINESE YOUTH READERS: WHAT NEXT?

Beijing Doll and *Paper Puppy* both reached a wide adolescent readership with their depictions of female adolescent sexuality, though they belong to the distinct yet intersecting writing traditions of *qingshaonian wenxue* (adolescent literature) and *qingchun wenxue* (youth literature) respectively, adopt different strategies to textual representations of sex and received contrasting receptions. While *Beijing Doll* was criticised and subsequently banned for its subversive nature, *Paper Puppy* reached critical acclaim. Yet, as I have demonstrated, the depiction of sex in each novel is more complex than their polarised reception suggests. Teeming with blunt descriptions of a young girl's (at times deeply problematic) pursuit of sexual freedom, *Beijing Doll* nevertheless undermines its subversive message by demonstrating its young protagonist's naivety and vulnerability. Conversely, *Paper Puppy* presents an ostensibly tame depiction of teenage sexuality, while simultaneously exploring the heroine's suppressed fantasies and providing rich spaces for queer reading by encoding homoerotic girlhood beneath a language of disarticulation.

In "Growing Up Human: The Case for Sexuality in Children's Books", Norma Klein calls for books that get past "the censorious morality and into a broader and more complex understanding" of what it means to grow up human (83). While *Beijing Doll* and *Paper Puppy* paint nuanced images of adolescent female sexuality, my analysis has also revealed their limitations. In both books, for instance, portrayals of sex fail to account for the joys of healthy heterosexual relationships. *Beijing Doll* defies sexual morality and abstinence in favour of sexual freedom but ends up representing sex as potentially cut off from reliable and nurturing romantic connections. In *Paper Puppy*, Su's homoerotic or heterosexual relationships often end before they even commenced – the female teacher she had a crush on declines her affections and she later stops a possible romantic relationship from developing between herself and her male teacher. As a result, the novels do not provide successful models of teenagers navigating the complexities of their emotional or physical intimacy in relationships as they happen. Therefore, it would seem that, for a group of new generation readers who grew up in the past two decades, the sexual discourses negotiated in both novels no longer seem adequate for them. After all, the tensions between sexual mores desired by young people and those endorsed by the state, particularly the conflicting opinions surrounding adolescent girls' sexual development, were a phenomenon shared by the post-70s and post-80s authors/readers like Yin and Chun, but not so much by youths growing up in the digital age.

Right now, we see Chinese adolescents acquiring increasingly easier access to information about sex. We see adolescent girl writers and readers flocking to digital media platforms to create or consume uncensored sexual content. No longer are they fans of Chun's straightforward sexual undertakings when new youth subcultures have emerged and new ways of exploring sex are available. Chinese YA fiction – which remains a major state-

approved guidance material for adolescent sexual development – encounters greater challenges than ever before, given that authors are writing for an increasingly sexually-literate teen readership in a globalised economy. However, in present-day China, we have yet to see more books portraying diverse sexual performances, orientations, identities, or intimacies.¹³ We have yet to see more stories documenting, with an affirmative rather than negative approach, how youths manage their sexual and reproductive health in romance and sexual relationships. In this sense, there is still a long way to go before we can freely and honestly talk about sex in Chinese YA literature.

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13 Another book by Yin, *Orange Fish*, unpacks the journey of a teen mother; Huang Chunhua's captivating novel, *She Once Was a True Love of Mine* (2014, otherwise named *She Is My Best Friend*), discusses the friendship between two adolescent girls struggling to reconcile the pressures of college enrollment and their family's burdened past. *Fourteen-year-old Is a Beautiful Age* (2021), by Wang Luqi, traces the psychological turmoil of a young girl who experienced sexual harassment. However, these novels often receive relatively scant critical attention.

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