
“Men control our vaginas; the state controls our wombs”.

Sheng Keyi’s novel *The Womb (Zigong)* and the representation of the female reproductive body

by

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Abstract: This paper aims to provide an example of how contemporary Chinese literature represents women’s role and identity in terms of “reproductive bodies”, and of the heavy social and psychological burden they have to shoulder in Chinese society. Women’s essential lack of freedom and autonomy in controlling their own body and their function as mothers is vividly depicted in some recent works by famous writers such as Ma Jian 马健 and Nobel laureate Mo Yan 莫言, in his acclaimed novel *Frogs* (2009). In my paper I will rather focus on the female narrative of this history of pain and violence, but also of women’s reappropriation of their own reproductive rights, by referring to Sheng Keyi 盛可以. I will mainly draw upon her recent novel *The Womb* (2019), a sort of “reproductive history” of the People’s Republic of China which, despite the recent abolition of the one-child policy, still provides a variety of stories about surrogate mothers, forced sterilization, and sex-selective and compulsory abortions.

The female body and literature: Historical background

Literature seems to be the best avenue to give expression to the body:

authorities (medical and socio-economic and political) have powerfully vested interest in *constructing* bodies in particular ways; literature, throughout the ages, works to remind us of this fact and thereby to *deconstruct* these myths, often by reinstating the delirium and the scandalousness of the body (Hillmann and Maude 2015: 5).

I will stress these two terms “deconstruction” and “scandalousness”, in relation to the body as pivotal to my analysis of how female Chinese writers depict the relationship between women and their reproductive life in contemporary China¹. Fic-

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tion can shape powerful representations of social, gender and cultural disparity conveyed by the body. Indeed, women's centuries-old condition of social and cultural marginalisation has been enforced on the basis of their different biology and therefore their allegedly weaker and predetermined physiological identity.

Besides, in terms of socio-political context, Chinese literature has often been the privileged means to raise controversial concerns, as historically, but also recently, writers have addressed their works to the body politic, in order to convey criticism, anxieties, and utopian and dystopian visions of culture and society. One example is the novel from which I draw the quotation in my title, Ma Jian's *The Dark Road*, which depicts contemporary China's political and social malaise through the lenses of the lack of reproductive freedom for women. But this focus on the use and role of the female body is by no means a recent phenomenon in Chinese literature. In so-called May Fourth literature (from the first decades of the Twentieth century), many authors emphasise – among the other shackles imposed on individuals by traditional society – women's total lack of self-determination in terms of maternity and sexual life.

“For Kristeva, the maternal body is located at the intersection of biology and culture” (Hanson 2015: 95); but it was a phenomenologist such as Merleau-Ponty, later echoed by Simone de Beauvoir, who stressed the tight connection between the body and human beings' perceptual system of thought: “[t]he self, for phenomenologists, as for Freud, is necessarily corporeal, the body constitutes the self. It is not a separate entity to which the self stands in relation. This body, however, is not simply what biology offers us an account of” (Lennon 2019).

Traditional Chinese culture used to stress the continuity of the family line and therefore the importance of women's reproductive role; this dogmatic precept exercised a terrible power over the whole existence of women within the family and the community, especially in the countryside, by imposing a heavy cultural mark on each individual's biological essence. After the Communist revolution, the impact of traditional culture was considerably reduced, and the one-child policy (in force from the 1980s to 2013) contributed to dismantling the long-standing equation between sex and reproduction (Pan 2007: 28). Nevertheless, the need for political and social control over a rapidly growing population led to an even harsher hegemony over, and manipulation of, the female body, while traditional beliefs concerning women's function as tools for procreation were never completely erased. Even though recent regulations have put an end to State intervention in this field – the policy was lifted at the beginning of 2016 – the Chinese government must now face “worrying population trends [falling birth rates] and women's demands around re-

book on modern Chinese fiction: *Narrativa cinese del Novecento. Autori, opere, correnti (Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction: Authors, works and schools*, Carocci, 2019) co-authored with M. Pirazzoli. She is the director of the book series *Translating Wor(l)ds*.

¹ I am exploring some examples of the representation of the female body in modern Chinese literature in my forthcoming article “Human/Inhuman/Posthuman Female Bodies in Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature: Literary Descriptions of Psychological and Social Unease,” in Victor Vuilleumier, Gérard Syari, Toshio Tokemoto and Yinde Zhang eds., *The Body in Asian Literatures in the 20th et 21st Centuries: Discourses, Representations, Intermediality*, Paris: Open Edition of the Collège de France, 2021.

productive rights” (Lau and Xie 2019). As in many other countries, despite the indisputable progress which women have achieved in terms of freedom of choice as regards their own body and sexual life, Chinese women – especially ones who are unmarried or live in peripheral rural areas – must still fight for complete self-determination and for the improvement of their reproductive rights.

One of the most crucial issues raised and debated at the beginning of last century in a China searching for modernity against a worrisome background of economic decline, semi-colonisation and social disruption, was the living conditions and position of women within a society still dominated by an obsolete yet pervasive patriarchal system. Traditionally confined to the inner space (*nei*) of the house and of society,² women were denied a complete education and freedom of choice in terms of marriage, motherhood and sexual life, subjected as they were to the indisputable power of men (mainly their fathers, brothers and husbands) and of other women (mothers-in-law). It was also in opposition to these elements that the Chinese revolution carried out radical social changes last century. Studies by both Chinese and Western scholars on the one hand highlight the impressive results of a cultural and social campaign which fought thoroughly against the marginalisation of women’s position within Chinese society; on the other hand, they express a deep concern for the extremely forceful methods applied in order to make this marginalisation and exclusion of women effective: control over the body and its functions.

As recognised by many scholars, the unequal treatment of women in many societies has been historically based on “women’s corporeal specificity”, which

is used to explain and justify the different (read: unequal) social positions and cognitive abilities of the two sexes. By implication, women’s bodies are presumed to be incapable of men’s achievements, being weaker, more prone to (hormonal) irregularities, intrusions, and unpredictabilities (Grosz 1994: 4).

Essays and literary works against the ancient dogmas of obedience and chastity, as well as the rigid norms of behaviour imposed on women, were central to early 20th century China’s intellectual discourse on modernity. However, most of the criticism was instrumental to promotion of other ends. An important reformer and a representative of the enlightened literati of the late Qing period, Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873-1929), wrote that to giving women an education and the possibility to find employment, thereby freeing them from their reclusion at home, was fundamental not for women as such but in order to “improve the species” and strengthen the nation: “Children’s education begins with the mother’s teaching, which is itself rooted in women’s education. Therefore women’s education fundamentally determines whether a nation will survive or be destroyed and whether it will prosper or languish in weakness” (Liang Qichao in Liu, Karl and Ko 2013: 194).

² In Chinese culture the concept of *nei* 内 does not only refer to the physical space of the family and domestic sphere, but also encompasses the private sphere of emotions and subjectivity. On the contrary, the *wai* 外 (outside) was dominated by men: this term refers to the public sphere, and, especially, the political and social one – in other words, the sphere of power. See Du, 2020.

Traditionally, women were obliged to avoid any sexual activity before marrying and after being widowed, some were even induced to commit suicide in the case of infringement of these strict precepts. We might recall here the words of Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936), one of the most important writers of the time, in order to describe what many progressive intellectuals thought about traditional women's condition in terms of coercion and patriarchal control:

便是“孝”“烈”
这类道德，也都是旁人毫不负责，一味收拾幼者弱者的方法。在这样社会中，不独老者难于生活，即解放的幼者，也难于生活。(Lu Xun [1919]: 44)

The virtues of filial piety and chastity are simply ways in which to persecute the young and frail while bystanders bear no responsibility. In this kind of society, it is not only the old who find that life is difficult, it's the same for the emancipated younger generation (Lu Xun 2017b: 136).

He once stated that “夫妇是伴侣，是共同劳动者，又是新生创造者”(Lu Xun 1919: 42) [husband and wife are companions, colleagues, and creators of new life] (Lu Xun 2017b: 129), while denouncing in another essay, in quite a sarcastic manner, the fact that:

[...]
父母之命媒妁之言的旧式婚姻，却要比嫖妓更高明。这制度之下，男人得到永久的终身的活财产。当新妇被人放到新郎的床上的时候，她只有义务，她连讲价钱的自由也没有，何况恋爱。[...]
至于男人会用“最科学的”学说，使得女人虽无礼教，也能心甘情愿地从一而终，而且深信性欲是“兽欲”，不应当作为恋爱的基本条件，因此发明“科学的贞操”，——那当然是文明进化的顶点了。”(Lu Xun 1933: 604).

[...] old style marriage that is ordered by parents and arranged by matchmakers is even cleverer than prostitution. Under this system, men obtain a perpetual, lifelong piece of living property. When the bride is placed into the bed of the groom, she has only her duty and lacks even the freedom to negotiate a price, to say nothing of love. [...] Some men are able to use the “most scientific” theories to induce women to happily stay faithful unto death; they believe that sexual desire is itself bestial and should not be a fundamental precondition for romantic love. They've therefore invented “scientific chastity” (Lu Xun 2017c: 178-179).

An early feminist perspective which examines and challenges women's destiny as individuals reduced to their body – and its (ab)use for the sake of procreation – can be found in Xiao Hong's works 萧红 (1911-1942). Her odd descriptions of brutality in sexual relationships imposed on women, infanticide, the exposure of newborns and unwanted motherhood are among the most striking elements of her narrative representation of rural society in the northeast of China during the Sino-Japanese war.

Although many improvements to women's lives were introduced as the result of social reforms and intellectual engagement, the idea that a tightly regulated family and sexual life for women was the main guarantor of social order was kept alive for a long time and still exerts a certain influence on both the authorities and ordinary people. In 1942, the female writer Ding Ling 丁玲 (1904-1986) penned a piercing

essay on the various forms of discrimination Chinese women suffered, even within the areas liberated by the Communists:

They got married partly due to physiological necessity and partly as a response to sweet talk about “mutual help”. Thereupon they are forced to toil away and become “Noras³ returned home”. Afraid of being thought ‘backward’, those who are a bit more daring rush around begging nurseries to take their children. They ask for abortions, and risk punishment and even death by secretly swallowing potions to produce abortions. But the answer comes back: “Isn’t giving birth to children also work? You’re just after an easy life, you want to be in the lime-light. After all, what indispensable political work have you performed? Since you are so frightened of having children, and are not willing to take responsibility once you have had them, why did you get married in the first place? No-one forced you to.” Under these conditions it is impossible for women to escape this destiny of “backwardness” (Ting Ling 1975: 102).

This “destiny of backwardness” has been tenaciously resisted by women activists and officially opposed by policy makers since the founding of the People’s Republic of China. However, such issues related to women’s liberation almost disappeared from the national narrative about the new China during the Maoist era, obscured as they were by the achievement of social liberation. As is most clear in the Chinese literature of those years – a mirror of the dominant political discourse – “gender oppression gives way to class struggle” (Yue 1993: 121); consequently, the female figure, which had been widely represented in its bodily articulations in May Fourth literature, was completely erased or abstracted from its corporeality, often becoming only a symbol. This is apparent in a famous novel, most representative of so-called “revolutionary romanticism”, *Song of Youth* (Qingchun zhi ge 青春之歌, 1958) by Yang Mo 杨沫 (1914-1995), which features the Bildungs-story of a young Communist activist. Although the plot is tightly connected to, and based on, the overlap between her intense sentimental life and her political accomplishments, her body and sexuality are only depicted as an object of the male gaze and of male lust – more specifically, those of a male member of the loathed land-owner class, whereby sexual harassment metonymically epitomises class oppression. Throughout the Maoist period the topic of reproductive freedom was rarely touched upon, let alone problematised in literature; the role of women as biologically predetermined to support Mao’s politics of demographic expansion was taken for granted. As far as female independence and rights were concerned, only adopting a masculine identity could allow women reach a certain degree of autonomy and independence from men, their family and the social role traditionally assigned to them.

Women’s reproductive life in post-Mao literature

Contemporary China stands in striking contrast to that world so deeply imbued with long-standing cultural and social biases, while at the same time representing its controversial evolution. After the dramatic changes introduced by Mao’s revolution and then by a rampant form of capitalism from the late 1970s onwards, women

³ The character of Nora from Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* was a symbol of women’s liberation in republican China.

today continue to struggle to exercise complete control over their own body in a society that is still partly rural, despite the extensive urbanisation and industrialisation achieved over the last few decades. In the “new era literature” (after Mao), women and their biological fate are still mainly represented through the male gaze: the fiction produced by the most important literary schools of the 1980s – the “roots-seeking school” (*xungen* 新根文学) and the avant-garde (*xianfeng xiaoshuo* 先锋小说) – tends to reproduce this pattern. For instance, speaking of Mo Yan’s novel *Red Sorghum* (Hong gaoliang jiazu 红高粱家族, 1987), Tonglin Lu elaborates on one of the leading female characters being only named after her family role, “Grandma”:

The absence of her name reveals the paradoxical nature of the author’s desire for an eternally desirable female body that is simultaneously an efficient tool for the reproduction of male descendants. Because she is less a person of flesh and blood than a conceptualized object of male desire, the heroine must remain nameless (Lu 1995: 68).

Indeed, some important female authors of post-Maoist literature have rehabilitated the corporeal significance of women, in an effort to claim their right to subjectivity and self-determination beyond the traditional construction of the female subject based on the patriarchal bio-cultural bias. We should mention Wang Anyi 王安忆 (b. 1954), Tie Ning 铁凝 (b. 1957) and Zhang Xinxin 张辛欣 (b. 1953) as clear examples of the attempt to reverse this trend. In the former case, “it was the first time that a woman writer chose for her protagonist women who were no longer passive tool for male satisfaction, but actually the active party in sexual love with their male partners” (Li 1994: 125). The female characters in both Wang Anyi and Tie Ning’s fiction “belong to a new type of women: they endeavor to assert their own rights, including their right to sexual love” (Li 1994: 124).

More specifically, Zhang Xinxin has written short stories such as “Where did I miss you?” (Wo zai na’er cuoguo le ni 我在哪儿错过了你?, 1981), where abortion, while being described as a very unpleasant and lonely experience, is presented as the free choice of an independent woman who rejects the traditional role of wife and mother in the context of an unsatisfactory love affair. Eventually, the protagonist “decides to continue her current path because she is no longer able to— and indeed, perhaps does not intend— to take off the masculine mask, which has become the essence of her sense of self” (Wang L. 2020). Undoubtedly, yet surprisingly, the relative social and individual freedom brought to the Chinese people by Deng’s economic reforms has ended up restoring old models:

“Where did I miss you” perceptively articulates the historical and gendered transformation taking place in contemporary China, which moved away from the socialist gender equality that had promoted strong women and toward a sexual difference that valued traditional femininity (Wang L. 2020).

As far as maternity and motherhood are concerned, in the late 1980s, on a significantly different level of self-recognition, it was women poets who utterly reclaimed “the unique identity and role of their sex”, as is “demonstrated by the abundant descriptions of pregnancy, childbearing and delivery in poetry” (Wong 2010: 97).

As has been stated in several recent publications, such as the collection of essays by Chinese scholars *Women, Family and the Chinese Socialist State, 1950-2010* (Kang 2019), many results in terms of reproductive freedom were achieved from the Mao period and onwards: “The implementation of the new Marriage Law, the collectivization, and the new social order brought by the Communist revolution led to the decline of the traditional family hierarchy and loosened its tight grip of young people’s marriage choices” (15) while “the post-Mao market economy provided fertile ground for the growth of individual autonomy in the pursuit of romance, courtship and marriage”. The editor of the book then adds, “The state did, however, impose a tight control over sexuality and private life” (16). In the Mao era as Sheng Keyi shows in the novel *The Womb* (which is the core case study of this article), women “had to shoulder the double burdens of production and reproduction” (Kang 2019: 17). The real issue was that although the new attitudes adopted by the Communists and the modern practices deployed in the country had reduced the burden of a sexual life aimed only at procreation,

the state family planning policy and law clashed with the tradition of male supremacy. [...] many women in the countryside were still the tools for producing boys. When the restriction on birth ran into conflict with the desire for a boy, women’s fates were more or less affected (Qin and Li 2019: 53).

This topic is at the centre of two important novels written respectively by Mo Yan and Ma Jian: *Frogs* and *The Dark Road*. They both focus their social criticism on the destiny of rural women obliged to abide by the existing one-child policy, often by means of violent birth control practices. Both writers succeed in providing a gloomy representation of women’s physical and psychological suffering in their attempts to resist the limits imposed on their reproductive freedom. In particular, Ma Jian’s heroine, Meili, embodies women’s difficult struggle against both state oppression and the legacy of the traditional patriarch represented by her husband. Nevertheless, in these works the desperate and often silent rebellion of female peasants is still seen from a male standpoint, albeit an enlightened one and – as in the early republican era – it is instrumental to the two writers’ specific political or cultural agenda. Mo Yan and Ma Jian’s graphic descriptions of forced abortions and other abuses against women result in extensive criticism against the Chinese government as a whole (Ma Jian) or in a controversial attempt to explain and elaborate on the traumatic effects of China’s one-child policy’s (Mo Yan). But both authors fail to convey the more intimate and complicated aspects of female subjectivity, as well as the problematic issue of women’s right to bear children or not, and to personally control their own sexual life, by freeing themselves from long-standing and devastating psychological, cultural, family, social and political shackles. Elisabeth Cullingford reflects on how the Chinese case described by Mo Yan and Ma Jian reverberates in other countries, producing different and unexpected effects:

In the Chinese context, these novels appear subversive, and in the case of *The Dark Road*, even overtly feminist. They resonate with Hillary Clinton’s 1995 Beijing declaration that “women’s rights are human rights,” itself a none-too-subtle condemnation of the one-child policy. But shoehorned into a preexisting discursive frame, these male authors’ defense of women’s freedom to reproduce paradoxically serves the ends of American antiabortion activ-

ists who oppose women's freedom not to reproduce, both in America and in the developing world (Cullingford 2019: 77).

The literature on the concept of the body as an intersection of a variety of elements encompassing biology, psychology, society, religion, ideology and culture is boundless and extremely variegated. What also seems to be important in the analysis of the body's literary representation is the need to rethinking the body as a "political product". By rejecting the determinism often adopted in many previous studies and political practices, Grosz argues that bodies "must be understood through a range of disparate discourses and not simply restricted to naturalistic and scientific modes of explanation" (1994: 20), as they "are always irreducibly sexually specific, necessarily interlocked with racial, cultural, and class particularities" (19).

Cultural and class particularities have always affected Chinese women's conditions in terms of reproduction. As observed by many scholars, in present-day China, with respect to the body, individual freedom and sexual identity, women seem to be haunted by both the offshoots of traditional practices and norms, and the social stigma attached to independent and unconventional behaviours based on the new concepts of femininity, physical appearance and sexuality. Indeed, Chinese women's condition of dramatic uncertainty, sometimes even powerlessness when it comes to controlling their own reproductive function, is something they share with women from other countries and cultures. What is interesting though is to analyse how reproductive freedom affects a variety of phenomena connected with women's ordinary lives, personal health, affective relationships and occupational goals in a country like China, where collective and individual needs are often deeply entangled. The long-standing gap between city and countryside also plays a fundamental role in influencing women's destiny and their right to control and handle their own body.

Sheng Keyi's bio-political narrative on women

I have chosen to focus here on some disconcerting representations of women bearing the consequences of invasive cultural and social policies directly on their own body. Writing at a time in which social positivism has conjugated with China's dramatically rapid technological and economic rise, resulting in even more pervasive and subtle methods of individual control, Sheng Keyi 盛可以 (b. 1973) stands out as one of the most impressive contemporary Chinese writers. This author adopts harshly critical and graphic tones to describe how, in a landscape of indisputably enlarged freedom and recognition for Chinese women, the burning issues of the body and reproduction are still a fruitful field for controversial and disrupting narratives. As we will see, for this writer the narrative technique of estrangement is instrumental in denouncing many women's low or non-existent self-awareness and education when it comes to reproductive matters. It is precisely by means of this technique that she manages to deconstruct a variety of cultural and political biases rooted in Chinese rural society.

Sheng Keyi adopts a narrative strategy which we might describe as "cartographic" (in Rosi Braidotti's sense, 2002: 2), one that combines the historical and

the geo-cultural, placing the individual vis-à-vis with power, understood as both the imposition of restrictions (*potestas*) and self-affirmation (*potentia*). In doing so, she builds images of women as victims of a long-standing socio-cultural (biopolitical) system of oppression and marginalisation, but also as agents of their own struggle against it.

While recognising women's political and economic contribution to the construction of the People's Republic of China and its present accomplishments, the Chinese Communist government during the 1950s and 1960s "failed to recognize gender differences and women specific issues" (Kang 2019: 7). Sheng Keyi's novels deeply explore these issues, extending them to present-day China and encompassing a variety of cultural restrictions, abuses, scandals and acts of violence inflicted on women as such, through social and cultural stigmas, and physical and psychological suffering, but also stressing the essential difference between women living in the city and ones dwelling in rural areas. Similarly to Xiao Hong, her primary concern is to stir the souls of the rural women; in her 1935 novel Xiao Hong had argued that:

“在乡村永久不晓得，永久体验不到灵魂，只有物质来充实她们” (Xiao Hong [1935]: 68). [In the village, they [women] would never know, they would never be able to experience their souls, only material aspects fulfilled their lives]⁴. In Sheng Keyi's latest novel, *The Womb*, one of the main characters comments on the destiny of her grandmother, born in the Nineteenth century and still affected by her bound feet, during a TV interview held on March 8, International Women's Day:

一个人可能无法与时代战争 更不可能叫板庞大的社会制度 习俗也是一头凶猛的野兽 生理上的小脚不是最可怜的 女性精神上的小脚才是最悲哀的。(Sheng 2018a: 89)

One cannot be at war with one's own epoch, challenging a gigantic social system is even harder, local customs too are a wild beast. Physical small-feet are not the most pitiable thing, women's psychological small-feet are the saddest thing.

Despite its sometimes dystopian quality, Sheng Keyi's narrative about women provides a different, more pro-active and nuanced perspective, especially compared to more pessimistic depictions such as those by male authors like Ma Jian and Mo Yan, both of whom address the topic of demographic abuses on women in their above-mentioned novels. Some of their descriptions and the comprehensive approach to the female reproductive body in their works can be encapsulated in the concept of "monstrous"; Braidotti emphasises the "unique blend of *fascination* and *horror*" inspired by the maternal body:

Woman/mother is monstrous by excess; she transcends established norms and transgresses boundaries. She is monstrous by lack: woman/mother does not possess the substantive unity of the masculine subject. Most important, through her identification with the feminine she is monstrous by displacement: as sign of the in-between areas, of the indefinite, the ambiguous, the mixed, woman/mother is subjected to a constant process of metaphorisation as "other than" (1997: 67).

⁴ All translations from Chinese are mine unless otherwise noted.

On the one hand, the two authors see female reproductive freedom as just one of the many social issues to be exposed and discussed: in their deeply political and cultural critique of the Chinese government and Chinese society they contribute to the process of “othering” the maternal bodies of their protagonists. On the other hand, Sheng Keyi is more focused on recognising the female body itself: we could say, borrowing Braidotti’s words, that hers is a way of “think[ing] through the body and not in a flight away from it” (2002: 5).

Sheng Keyi condemns local communities and the state authorities for allowing female peasants to become victims of ignorant practices – the absurd vestiges of the patriarchal hierarchical system, which gave the husband and the mother-in-law almost life-and-death power over the bride, as well as the villagers’ morbid curiosity and hostile judgement. At the same time, this writer succeeds in depicting the powerful, resilient reaction put up by more aware younger women. The essential difference we find in her novels is the acknowledgement of women’s agency and empowerment through and not despite their body, something that Xiao Hong could not express in her gloomy fiction, set against the troubled background of China in the first half of last century.

Born in 1973 in a small village in Hunan province, like many other women from rural and rather backward areas of China Sheng Keyi moved to Shenzhen, in the more industrialised south, in the early 1990s, in search of better job opportunities, and eventually settled in Beijing. She has devoted much of her work to portraying women’s social and personal world, also relying on her own experience as a migrant writer born in a rural region of central China. According to Schaffer and Song (2013):

[h]er novels delineate how women struggle against stereotype, prejudice and marginalization; how their identities are shaped by contingencies of age, gender and place of origin, coupled with a lack of social or economic capital; and how their embodied desires are relegated to the fantasies, fears, desires and derision of men.

Sheng Keyi deals with such issues connected to Chinese women and their reproductive life in her short stories and other outstanding works, such as *Northern Girls* (Beimei 北美, 2004), a novel about female workers in Shenzhen which scrutinises the “migrant female body” (see Picerni 2019), and *Paradise* (Fudi 福地, 2016), a dystopian story about women detained in a procreation centre for surrogacy. But the most complete and punchy narrative is her latest, powerful novel, *The Womb*, also published as *Xirang* 熙攘 (Sheng Keyi 2018a), a title with the allusive meaning of “fertile soil” or “living earth”.⁵ As the author herself explains

《子宫》便是以老寡妇的大家族为蓝本的虚构作品。子宫孕育生命，对于农村女性来说，生育几乎是她们唯一的价值，子宫也是她们一生沉重的负担，然而她们一辈子也没能认识自己的身体，没能意识到自我与禁锢。(Sheng Keyi 2019)

⁵ The word *xirang* refers to the “living earth”, a myth from the ancient Chinese classic *Shanhaijing* 山海经 (The classic of mountains and seas, third century BC to second century AD), where it is described as a kind of black mud which saved people from floods, a sort of self-regenerating substance “which contains the vitality of the sky, is transmitted to earth, filling the function of an intermediary between sky and earth” (Ichirō 2009: 233).

The Womb is a fictional work based on the big clan of an old widow. The uterus breeds life. For rural women, fertility is almost their only value. The uterus is also a heavy burden for them throughout their lives. However, throughout their lives they are unable to recognise their own bodies and they are not aware of their own self and confinement.

This situation of bewilderment and ignorance is deeply rooted in China's *xiangtu* 乡土 (native soil) reality and history. As stated by Li Zhongqing and Wang Feng, "[t]he disintegration of the family, the traditional unit for the population control, and collapse of the traditional check on reproduction led to the greatest population growth ever in Chinese history" (cited in Wang Y. 2019, p. 148). Therefore, the demographic explosion produced the conditions for the subsequent one-child-policy, which on the one hand made it possible to reduce the reproductive pressure on women, but on the other forced them either to passively accept often brutal contraceptive and sterilization methods, or to put up a painful struggle and resistance. To quote Kang, "the policy did unprecedentedly put women's body and family life under the total control of state power, thereby giving rise to myriad forms of resistance throughout the reform era" (2019: 18).

One of Sheng's most accomplished works so far, *The Womb*, is focused on the uterus, as a synecdoche of women's bodies, and also a metonymy for China's controversial evolution from a backward rural society to a modern industrial country over the last five decades. *The Womb* takes the form of a family saga and a coming-of-age novel, that tells the story of three generations of women, and in particular of seven female characters within the Chu family of Hunan (Sheng's own native province), from the late 1970s to the present day. The author mainly presents these women's intricate personal struggles both in the small village where they were born, and in the more challenging urban contexts of Beijing (Chu Yu) and Shanghai (Chu Xue). The novel recounts several stories of unhappy marriages, unwanted births and abortions, as well as the enduring of suffering in the name of chastity or lawful sterilisation.

The coming-of-age genre approach allows the writer to build a solid and well-structured "her-story" of contemporary Chinese women's reproductive life across four generations of women. Borrowing Kathleen Lennon's words, we might say that Sheng's narrative of the female experience in contemporary rural China "provides a phenomenology of the body as lived throughout the different stages of a woman's life" (Lennon 2019). By means of crude corporeal descriptions, the writer emphasizes how the sense of scandal still conventionally perceived in the free expression of women's sexuality and of their reproductive power should rather be shifted to the physical and mental abuses suffered by women because of their bodies.

Far from being the umpteenth example of Chinese *xiangtu xiashuo* 乡土小说 or "nativist fiction" with a documentary style, the novel delves deeply into each character's individual story and inner motivations, creating a sophisticated literary portrayal of female subjectivity against a realistic social background, based on the author's own personal experience.

见过结紮完的妇女，被两轮板车拖回来，花棉被从头捂到脚；见过不想结紮的妇女如何挣扎，哭叫。结紮、上环、堕胎，这样的词汇像黑鸟般在天空低旋，让人心惊肉跳

。看着村里行走或劳动的妇女，就会想像她们肚皮上的伤疤，身体里的钢圈。(Sheng Keyi 2019)

I have seen women after a tubal ligation being dragged back on a two-wheeled cart, covered in cotton quilts from head to toe; I have seen women who didn't want to have their tubes ligated struggle and cry. Words like ligation, coil-insertion and abortion were whirling in the sky like black birds, so frightening. Looking at women walking or working in the village, I would imagine the scars on their belly and the steel ring in their bodies.

What we learn from this novel is that the very primary obstacle to Chinese women's pursuit of a full and self-determined reproductive life is still ignorance: the superstitious education received within rural families or the total lack of education. State policies and old cultural beliefs exert a terrible power, especially over poorly educated villagers' minds and bodies. Therefore, the key issue raised by Sheng is the lack of proper education among female peasants. I will refer to two episodes: the first one revolves around Chu Yun, the eldest daughter of the family, who gets pregnant at the age of 15 in 1982 and is then obliged to marry the peasant whose child she is bearing. Ruminating on the atmosphere of reticence surrounding sex and puberty in her family, Chu Yun exposes mothers' responsibility in perpetuating daughters' bafflement on matters related to their sexuality:

[...]

回想起少女时期对两性关系的盲目无知和母亲态度里的肮脏鄙视，仍然觉得浑身不适

。母亲从没告诉过

她女孩子有月经，直到她放学回来裤子红了一片，才递给她一卷黄色的草纸；这时候她也没有教她停经和怀孕、月经和排卵的关系，更没有说过女人是怎么怀孕的——

母亲根本不提及这些成长中的麻烦，这给她提供了行使责怪蠢货晚辈的权威与机会。(Sheng Keyi 2018a: 3)

Thinking of the blind ignorance and the dirty contempt for sexual relations in their mother's attitude when she was a girl, she still felt unwell. Mother never told her daughters about menstruation, only when Chu Yun's pants turned red after school, she handed her a roll of yellow rough straw paper; she never taught them the relationship between stoppage of menstruation and pregnancy, menstruation and ovulation, let alone how women got pregnant. Mother never mentioned to them the troubles of puberty, and this gave her authority as an elder and an opportunity to blame juniors for their naivety.

Another episode is taken from the sad story of Lai Meili, who marries Laibao, the dumb son of the Chu family: completely lacking any basic knowledge about sex and procreation, the young Meili gets pregnant twice after giving birth to her first daughter, Chu Xiu. The state birth-control system proves unable to reach the most inexperienced and vulnerable members of rural society: husband and wife do not know how to make proper use of the contraception tools they are given. Eventually, while hiding from the hospital staff to avoid a medical abortion procedure, the poor girl dies of miscarriage. In the following passage, Sheng Keyi's shows how the unaware husband, Laibao, mistakes a condom for a white balloon:

这时初来宝知道怎么让赖美丽的肚皮再次鼓起来了。他[...], 将剩下的白气球统统吹起来挂屋子里逗初秀玩[...]。他摸着赖美丽的肚子，感觉每天有人在往里吹气，吹一口就胀一点，慢慢地变成坟丘的形状。冬天恰好来打掩护，他往她身上套了很多衣服，就

像小时候他躲在柜子里干的。他们要让这件事情成为他俩的秘密，把肚子藏起来。但是气球越吹越大，好像马上就要爆炸，根本藏不住，连小孩子都看出来来了。(Sheng Keyi 2018a: 41)

At this time Chu Laibao knew how to make Lai Meili's belly swell up again. He [...] blew up the remaining white balloons and hung them up in the room to let Chu Xiu play. [...] Touching Lai Meili's beautiful belly, he felt that every day someone was blowing air in it, little by little, and slowly it turned into the shape of a grave. Winter provided a kind of screen: he put a lot of clothes on her body, just as he would do in the wardrobe when he was a child [trying on his mother's dresses]. They wanted to make this their secret and hide her belly. But the balloon was blowing bigger and bigger, as if about to explode, and they couldn't hide it at all, even children could see it.

This narrative strategy of estrangement – already adopted in *Paradise*, which is narrated through the naive eyes of a mentally retarded girl – makes Sheng Keyi's desolate depiction of the weakest members of rural society even more striking and ironic. The family's and state's incomplete information and education about sex and reproduction are the main factors responsible for the tragic life and sometimes death of many women peasants, especially ones with weaker cognitive skills. In Sheng's words:

我的视野中，农村女性是最脆弱的群体。[...] 几十年的社会变革，女性参与生产劳动的机会增加，但获得经济增长的福利和其他权利相对较少。

In my eyes, rural women are the most vulnerable group. [...] The social reforms carried out over the last few decades have increased women's opportunities to participate in productive labour, but the economic growth has brought them relatively few benefits and other rights (Sheng Keyi 2019).

Another compelling factor is the traditional moral burden: the two central figures in the story, the grandmother and the mother, are both the victims and the perpetrators of old norms that prevent them from living a healthy and full sexual life. As a widow, the grandmother lives a life of self-restraint, also obliging her daughter-in-law – when she becomes a widow at the age of thirty – to live as a prisoner to old-fashion biases in a tangled web of unfair ethical values.

Besides the more fragile and unaware people in the countryside, Sheng is also concerned about generational gaps in Chinese society: the elderly women living in rural villages, such as the one Sheng modelled after her own hometown, are the people who suffer the most from the legacy of the traditional culture and mentality. Qi Nianci, the old female head of the family, represents the ancient customs of subjection and sacrifice imposed on widows, and her condition is no different from that of the “ghost” described by Lu Xun in his essay on female chastity:

女子死了丈夫，便守着，或者死掉[...]寡妇是鬼妻，亡魂跟着，所以无人敢娶。(Lu Xun [1918]: 37; 38)

[I]f a woman's husband dies, she should stay a widow or die [...] the widow was considered the wife of a ghost, and as she was followed by her ghost husband, nobody would dare marry her. (Lu Xun 2017a: 114;118)

The lives of two widows in Sheng's story do not seem so distant from the description given by Lu Xun:

吴爱香始终觉得体内的钢圈与丈夫的死亡有某种神秘关联，那东西是个不祥之物。此后缓慢细长的日子里，她从心理不适发展到身体患病，这个沉重的钢圈超过地球引力拽她往

下。好在生活分散了注意力，艰辛挽救了她。她听从丈夫的遗言，辅助婆婆，从不违逆。别人看到这对婆媳关系平和融洽，也看到戚念慈的厉害冷酷——

她也是三十岁上下死了丈夫，懂得怎么杀死自己身体里的女人，怎么当寡妇（Sheng Keyi 1918°: 6).

Wu Aixiang always felt that the steel ring in her body had a mysterious connection with her husband's death and that it was an ominous thing. Since then, with the slow passing of the days, her psychological discomfort turned into physical illness and that heavy steel ring exceeded the gravity of the earth, dragging her down. Fortunately, life distracted her and hardships saved her. She obeyed her husband's last words and assisted her mother-in-law, without ever and disobeying her. Other people would see the peaceful and harmonious relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, and that cold-hearted Qi Nianci [had taught her] how to be a widow – her husband had also died when she was thirty, and she knew how to kill the woman in her own body.

The destiny of Qi's daughter-in-law, Wu Aixiang, is particularly sad as she is caught between two epochs marked by different political systems but identical forms of bio-political control over women's sexual life and reproductive function. The foreign body inserted into her womb – the intrauterine device which proves to be impossible to remove, causing her a lifetime of pain – is the symbol, both material and spiritual, of her eternal slavery.

When one day three daughters of the Chu family take their mother to the hospital for a check up because of her problems with the birth control ring that has been inserted into her body, they learn what the uterus is from a female doctor:

女人长了子宫，这没什么好说的 [...]

那天，初云初月初冰一行四人，收拾得干净整洁踏上去医院的长堤，就当是陪母亲做一次春游。

挽起母亲的手臂，打算带她去做B超检查。母亲正盯着着墙壁上的彩色图画。

那是什么东西初云问道。

图画看上去像一个动物脑袋，耳朵横向张开，仿佛正张嘴大笑。

长在你们身体里的 女医生回答 也是女人最麻烦的部分

是肺 初月说

是胃 初冰说

是子宫 女医生依然很亲切，她站到画前，和风细雨地讲解起来 看

这个是子宫口，这一段是子宫颈 这是卵巢 这一个空地 就是子宫 胎儿在这里发育也是放节育环的地方

母女四人凑到一块，像一群听到异响的鸡，伸长脖子静止不动，似乎在思考应对措施

。

那东西 原来这个样子的啊 初冰摸着小腹，呼出一口气来

像朵喇叭花 初月对花有研究 也像鸡冠子花

初云没说话，她没法想像那是她身体里的东西，孩子是从这一丁点地方长大的。她的视

线停在 输卵管 的位置，思绪万千。

这个输卵管切断以后 卵子会到哪儿去 初月问出了初云心里的问题

卵子遇不到精子的话，过两三天衰亡，溶解，被组织吸收 医生回答

女人们似懂非懂，慢慢走出医务室，好像感觉身体里堆满了卵子的尸体，脚步滞重。(Sheng Keyi 2018a: 53-55)

A woman has a uterus, there is nothing to say [...]

On that day, the three of them, Chu Yun, Chu Yue and Chu Bing packed up their things neatly and set foot on the long embankment leading to the hospital. They took their mother by the arm to get a B-ultrasound. Mother was staring at a colourful picture on the wall.

What is that, Chu Yun asked.

The picture looked like an animal's head, whose ears spread out of the sides, as if opening its mouth and laughing.

It's inside your body, the female doctor answered, *and it is also women's most troublesome part. It's the lungs,* said Chu Yue.

It's the stomach, said Chu Bing

It is the uterus. The female doctor was still very kind. She stood in front of the painting and explained it in a gentle and mild way. *Look, this is the uterus, this section is the cervix. These are the ovaries. This empty space is the uterus. The foetus develops here, and this is also the place of the birth control ring.*

The four of them, the mother and her daughters, gathered together, like a group of chickens after hearing some strange noises, stretched their necks and remained still, as if thinking about their next move.

Oh, so that thing is like this, Chu Bing touched her own belly and exhaled.

It looks like a petunia.

Chu Yun didn't talk, she couldn't imagine that it was something in her body, and that the child grew in that little place. She paused her gaze on the position of the fallopian tube, filled with thoughts.

After this fallopian tube has been cut off, where will the eggs go? Chu Yue asked the question that was in Chu Yun's mind.

If the egg does not meet the sperm, it will decay, dissolve, and be absorbed by the tissue after two or three days, said the doctor.

The women seemed to understand, and slowly walked out of the clinic, feeling as if their bodies were full of eggs and their feet unable to move.

Sheng Keyi's criticism also concerns the use and abuse of both old and new techniques and technologies for controlling the female body. The grandmother and the mother are both victims of these devices: the former had her feet bound as a child, while the latter's life is ruined by the birth control ring inserted into her after she had given birth to six children – five girls and a boy. Her oldest daughter who gave birth to two children before the age of thirty, and then underwent tubal ligation surgery, eventually decides to have a tubal reversal after realising her husband has had extramarital relationship: she is in love with another man and wants to have a child from him.

The only two fully educated women of the family, Chu Xue (a scholar) and Chu Yu (a doctor), who live in big cities, definitely display greater awareness and self-confidence with regard to sex and reproduction. However, they too experience a series of problems and setbacks, and have to face a range of moral, social and economic difficulties when it comes to their marital and reproductive life. At the age of thirty-three, at the early stage of a promising career as an academic, Chu Xue embarks on a relationship with an older professor who is already married, and when she gets pregnant, she decides to abort her child in order to save her career. She reflects that:

她了解了政策以及违反政策的处理办法，过去学校曾有人违反政策开除公职。生育是以夫妻为前提，法律并不支持非婚生子，不结婚就没有生育权利。如果失去刚刚获得的工作，便没有能力抚养孩子。她知道可以花钱随便找个人登记假结婚。她不愿意她和夏先生的孩子还没出生就像个难民一样需要避难，过早地蒙上一股凄凉。她胆子大的时候，是因为单枪匹马无所顾忌，怀孕使她变得胆小与怯懦。(Sheng Keyi 2018a: 119-120)

She knew the policy very well and how the authorities dealt with members of the college that had violated it: they had been fired. Procreation was based on the existence of a husband and a wife, the law did not support having children out of wedlock, and there was no right to have children outside marriage. If she lost the job she just obtained, she would not have had enough money to raise her child. She knew that she could spend money on finding someone to register for a false marriage. She didn't want her child with Mr. Xia, who had yet to be born, to live as a refugee, prematurely shrouded in misery. When she behaved in a daring way, it was because as someone single she could be strong and unscrupulous. Pregnancy made her timid and fearful.

When she finally marries a colleague, at the age of forty-two, people are concerned about her childlessness, as she is unable to get pregnant again. Sheng Keyi informs us of what the people in the village used to say about the women from the Chu family: ironical proof of the endurance of superstitions and beliefs about women's destiny.

Here, Sheng Keyi seems to echo Braidotti's warning that "anatomy [alone] is *not* a destiny" (1997: 65). But this seems to be the general opinion of society. Throughout the novel, the author highlights in grey all the dialogues and inner monologues, as well as people's gossip, the external "voice" of the villagers and the family's fellow citizens, who – like an omniscient "big brother" or the chorus in a Greek tragedy – observes and mercilessly criticises the (female) members of the family:

当她超过四十二岁仍然没有生育时，人们开始替她着急。城里的人推荐不孕不育名医，村里人推荐草药偏方还有观音庙。她和财经丈夫一概谢过，他们决定做丁克夫妻。于是人们便不好意思再操心了。但村里人又有种言论，说初安运的坟址并不是真的好瞧瞧他们家 傻的傻 死的死 该生育的没生育 不该生育的挺着肚 该结婚的没结婚 结了婚的闹离婚。(Sheng Keyi 2018a: 126)

When she was forty-two and still had no children, people started worrying about her. People from the city recommended infertility doctors. People from the village recommended her to take herbal remedies and to visit the Guanyin Temple. She and her accountant husband thanked them all and decided to remain a childless couple. Thus people felt embarrassed to keep on worrying about that. But people in the village made another statement, saying that the site chosen for Chu Anyun's [their father] grave was not propitious. *Look at their family: some are idiots, some are dead; those who should have given birth didn't, and those who should not have given birth, their bellies swelled up; those who should have got married didn't marry and those who got married divorced.*

This passage gives us a sense of the huge weight that public opinion and the community's and family's moral standards still exert on individuals in rural – but sometimes even urban – China. In the author's own words:

城市女性虽可免于挨刀，但截然不同的境遇同样严峻，像《子宫》中初家四女儿初雪的故事，恐怕并不罕见。(Sheng Keyi 2018b)

Although urban women could avoid undergoing surgery, their completely different situations are equally severe. Like the story of Chu's fourth daughter Chu Xue in *The Womb*, I'm afraid it is not uncommon.

Conclusions

In this modern family saga, Sheng Keyi manages to tackle the complicated question of Chinese women's sexuality and their struggle to survive in a male-dominated world, or to achieve complete control over their reproductive life, by means of an unconventional style enriched with a strongly female tone that is neither stereotyped nor rhetoric. Through the multiple female experiences narrated in this "herstory", one realises that in the last few decades, compared to previous epochs, Chinese society has undergone a general improvement in terms of cultural and economic resources which has provided Chinese women with new tools to express themselves and their self-determination in the reproductive sphere. However, as Sheng Keyi demonstrates, the uterus is still at the centre of a continuous "war" both in the rural and in the urban context. "一场子宫的战争——她就是这么理解刚刚结束的家庭危机的。" [A war on the uterus. That's how she [Chu Xue] interpreted the family crisis that had just ended] (Sheng Keyi 2018a: 166).

Moreover, while the new material conditions and laws seem to guarantee better conditions for Chinese women in terms of their reproductive and sexual life, what is still missing is a far more tolerant and open spiritual understanding of their rights. In *The Womb* some of the female characters persist in having children, while others struggle not to have them; some wish to marry and to live a full reproductive life, while others, even more sophisticated and educated ones, lack the time or money to choose when and with whom to have children. These are certainly universal issues, but Sheng Keyi's narratives have the unique merit of exploring and revealing the many culturally, historically and socially-specific obstacles that women have to face in coping with their reproductive reality. The coexistence of ancient beliefs and post-modern elements, typical of the present-day People's Republic of China, are highlighted by this writer, who at the same time undertakes the challenge of awakening the mind and conscience of women through her fiction of empowerment, starting precisely from the physical and psychological emotions conveyed by the body. Again, "anatomy [alone] is *not* destiny" – and this is precisely Sheng's concern:

女性的生育负担，一直没有得到应有的尊重与重视。女人的命运受子宫拖累，生育之荣辱，性事之愁苦，而且子宫又是一个疾病高发之地，像一颗定时炸弹随时会夺去女人的生命。子宫像重轭卡在女性的脖子上，她们缺乏必要的关注，缺乏更多的温暖。尤其是过往几十年中，对于她们的身体和精神所经历的创伤，甚至都没获得得言语的抚慰。(Sheng Keyi 2019)

Women's burden of childbirth has never received the respect and attention it deserves. The fate of a woman is entangled with her uterus, the honor and disgrace of childbirth, the sorrow of sexual affairs, and the uterus is a place with a high incidence of diseases, like a time bomb that can kill women at any time. The uterus is stuck on women's neck like a heavy yoke. They

lack the necessary attention and lack more warmth. Especially in the past few decades, they have not even received verbal comfort for the trauma they have experienced physically and mentally.

Indeed, China has adopted a new approach and a new practice in dealing with women's reproductive life, more out of concern about its plummeting birth rates and the consequent ageing of its population – which is already causing many problems to the welfare system for old people in a modern country of almost 1,440 billion inhabitants – than for the sake of women's rights and freedom (Lau and Xie 2019).⁶ As a socially engaged writer, Sheng Keyi has brought about a radical change of perspective in the literature on women, putting them on the stage as subjects and agents, despite the enduring difficulties and obstacles to their freedom. She has refused to follow the traditional scheme (at work throughout the last century and still common in the new one) of depicting them as mere victims of hegemonic state policies and men's enduring biases.

An appropriate conclusion to this analysis may be drawn from the ending of an article by the author herself, which is full of both nightmarish perceptions and positive expectations:

昨晚有梦，梦见被困在某个人口稀少的荒凉之地，当地向阎王租赁女鬼的子宫繁殖人口，同时设立配种集中营，处于排卵期的女性在工作人员的监督下，在规定的时间内完成配种。路上的女人变成了一个子宫，她们弹跳着前进，没有发出任何声音。我在逃跑中惊醒，意识到性别恐惧的幽灵依然紧附。这意味着我必须继续以写作的方式对抗这个幽灵。(Sheng Keyi 2018b)

Yesterday I had a dream. I was trapped in a sparsely populated and desolate place. The locals bred the population of Yama, the king of Hell, by renting women's wombs. At the same time, they had set up a breeding concentration camp, where women in the ovulation period would complete the breeding within the specified time under the staff's supervision. Every woman on the road was turned into a womb. They walked ahead bouncing, without any sound. I was running when I woke up and realised that the ghost of gender-fear is still closely following us. This means that I must continue to fight this ghost through my writing.

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⁶ The PRC government has just recently announced it will allow its citizens to have a third child, in order to contrast the unprecedented decline of fertility in China.

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