Sexuality, Feminism, Censorship

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My own awakening began with the awakening of my awareness of sexual rights. The instinctive demands of sexuality drove my desire for individual rights. The most powerful motivation behind wanting to know about and understand rights was my desire to be able to have sex with dignity—to be respected during and after sex.

I went through a divorce when I was very young, just when my sexual desire was at its strongest. It was a very brutal affair, but there are horny men all over the place. However, the repression of female sexuality by this male-dominated society has occurred for thousands of years, so that today it forms a kind of invisible net. This society scrutinises women's private lives like a kind of Skynet. And not just concerning sex, but also the 'frivolousness' of their speech and behaviour around men. This censorship of women starts when they begin to develop sexually. Women themselves are imprisoned in this self-censorship of virtue to the point that they cannot move. So even though I wanted to fuck men like crazy every day, I had to pretend not to care about sex.

(Left) *Myself in the Mirror* (镜中的自己); (Right) *The Horse's Lover* (马的爱人). Paintings by Ye Haiyan.

I really wanted to go to bed with the men around me then, but I was afraid that they would make me feel cheap and make a big deal out of it. So, even though I knew clearly that having sex is very pleasurable, I didn't dare to do it. I endured the torment of sexual restraint for a very long time. Sexual repression is the greatest agony I have experienced in my life. I've even thought about having these words engraved on my tombstone. I always hoped that this pain inside me would come to an end. That's why I write about sex so boldly online and encourage women to pursue sexual happiness.

I happened on the 'Universal Declaration of Sexual Rights' on the internet in 2005. At the time, I didn't even know that the Declaration of Human Rights existed, so I learned about the right to make love before I learned about any other rights I have as a human. The Declaration of Sexual Rights laid a very good foundation for my transformation into an 'unrepentant slut'. Afterwards, I never found 'love' (sexual partners). I didn't want love; I just wanted a man with a strong body, but we all used 'love' as a pretext. I had a few one-night stands, and these experiences filled me with more and more interest in everything about sex. Later, I got to know some teachers from the field of sexuality studies. Then I abruptly came on the subject of 'sex-workers'. As it happens, this topic was also discussed in sexuality studies. It was the subject of sex-workers that enabled me to understand the situation of Chinese women—what they endure, the burdens they carry, and the needless injuries they confront.

A sex-worker, for example, generally sends most of the money she earns back home. It doesn't matter whether she's married; she doesn't receive even the slightest recognition or respect for her sacrifice and contributions. This is unjust. And aren't all women like sex-workers, contributing their labour?

When I first learned about all this, I thought of sex-workers as the most miserable women, and I wanted to help them. I tried to help them in many ways. It's different now. Now I think of them as the happiest women. Their incomes are high and they have a rich and abundant sex life.

The development of my women's consciousness began with oppression. In 2005, a nude photo of me was posted online and this led to a massive outpouring of verbal violence against me. People attacked me from all sides, attacking my looks, my age, my experience of divorce—for no reason other than I'd posted a few dimly lit nude photos of myself on the internet. When others abused and insulted me, this went unnoticed by site administrators and my complaints were ignored. But when I responded to the abuse in kind, my online ID was censored and blocked. This inequality in the right to speak made me aware of my own vulnerability. The internet is great for allowing reality to present itself. It was only then that I really understood and thought about relationships of power at the centre of the social environment.

In the middle of all this violence, I slowly began to realise that people place so many controls on women; as though everyone in society—not just men, but other women as well—feels entitled to correct women, to give them advice, to try to educate and lecture every woman they meet. So, I realised that I wasn't alone, but that I was a member of a disadvantaged group; I was just an ordinary Chinese woman. It was only at this point that I could start to consciously observe cases of violence against women, and then to understand the relationship between women and this society.

I realised I was in an extremely disadvantaged position. Even more than gender inequalities, I came to recognise inequalities of class, which are a problem that concerns the national system. So, I became very angry and wanted to change my situation. If I was to get what I wanted, I had to become socially engaged. This was the period in which I was transformed from an excluded, rootless *dagongmei* ('working girl') into a woman who follows social and public affairs. I wasn't yet aware of how great a change this was. I had no idea what a great stage I'd stepped on to. Even in the face of direct attacks, I still see reality clearly and stand firm against the oncoming winds. I am firmly convinced of the existence of the gender and class inequalities that I see with my own eyes. They must be changed.

Speaking out is what I do the most. Every day, I express my opinions online, and I've been doing this for 20 years. Because I am insignificant and ordinary, people have been very suspicious of me, even to the point of rejecting me outright. But, after all, the internet is an open space and, even if they resent me, they can't stop me from going online. They always scrutinise and censor me, though, and keep demanding that I act in the way they want me to.

What they say the most is: 'Why would a woman care about these things?' They demand that women stay in their place and only do what they think women should do. And then they say, 'Such a common person should mind their own business.' They also say, 'What do you know about women's rights? Why don't you go and read more books?' And they say, 'Who are you to discuss women's rights?' or 'It's pointless to speak out!' There are also friendly and well-intentioned people who speak warmly and tenderly and say, 'Wait until you become powerful and then you do all the things you want to do and say what you want to say.'

I've experienced scrutiny and censorship from millions of people, and even now they still debate whether I can be considered a feminist. These censors include ordinary internet users, website administrators, and internet administrators (that is, state internet police). First, they interrogate my gender, then my (class) status, then my qualifications and experience (my right to speak), and finally, the value of what I say. My words, my opinions, even my way of expressing myself have all been censored by countless eyes hidden in the dark. This censorship has gone on for years and, through it all, I have only continued to define my own new territories for speaking out. In the past few years, this territory has become smaller and smaller, and I can say less and less.

What causes me pain even today is this: there are no standards to their scrutiny, no specific criteria or examples to follow, and no clear instructions for implementing their suggestions. It's like this mysterious, ghostly, and invisible thing that exists only in the thoughts of our rulers and the will of officialdom. Your posts will be inexplicably deleted

and your ID will be cancelled. I hate that so many of my official accounts have been cancelled, making my voice fainter and fainter.

To preserve my channels of communication, all I can do is constantly feel around to find my way until I touch on some sensitive area, and then I engage in constant self-censorship.¹ In the process of doing that, though, I have a line I won't cross; I can't succumb completely. I can refrain from speaking about sensitive topics, but I've also never said things that violate common sense. In general, then, the line I won't cross in my self-censorship is trampling common sense.

There was a time when I thought that gender equality and women's rights were perfectly legal. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the equality of men and women has been a fundamental national policy. However, the banning of feminist self-publishing on the internet made me realise that the rules of censorship are different according to who is speaking. China is a typical society in the sense that the state is governed by controlling the people.

You can't always get everything you want. As one netizen reminded me, 'I can only eat one dish.' I can't please everyone. When I was a poor woman from an ordinary rural family, people would usually be sympathetic and cut me some slack when they would try to censor me. After all, my 'ingredients' were good. But if I'm a vulnerable woman from the subaltern lower classes and I refuse to submit to that vulnerable status, more formidable violence will come crashing down on my head. This means that if I want to protect myself, I must behave as they expect me to. Even though I'm poor and fat and saddled with debt, regardless of the difficulties I've been through, I still display filial piety, industriousness, love of family, and all the other meritorious virtues.

But this isn't the kind of 'female character' I want at all. I want to be a woman who is calm and comfortable. I want to not care about poverty, and I don't want to care about being fat. In my daily life, I want to be indolent and lazy, and I want to have a keen sense of observation and the ability to analyse things with care and to express myself with

uncommon maturity. But to cope with the pressure of this kind of censorship, I can only hide myself. I am like a woman who is hiding inside a shell, trying everything to seem mediocre and ignorant. The less exceptional a woman is, the more virtuous she is.

But every cell in my body is waiting, dreaming that one day I will be able to step calmly on to the podium. I may be fat, but I'm not clumsy. I may come from the lower classes, but I'm confident in myself and patient. I have short hair, neatly tucked behind my ears, a soft and gentle laugh, and a bold way of speaking. This is me. I'm a woman, uncensored, uncorrected, surrounded by encouragement and support and protection, openly living her own life.

I would like to thank Jinyan for giving me this platform today. I've certainly come one step closer to my dream. ■

Translated by Dušica RISTIVOJEVIĆ, edited by Malcolm THOMPSON.

¹Note by Zeng Jinyan: According to my study of the censorship of Ye Haiyan's public WeChat account @yehaiyan38 in 2016, 31.7 per cent of her posts were banned before they were published, 40 per cent of her 'top 10' posts and 50 per cent of her 'top 10 most read' posts were deleted by censors. All the censored posts were feminist commentaries by Ye on current social and political issues. The public WeChat account @yehaiyan38 had 8,217 subscribers and received more than RMB10,000/month in contributions from readers during the period of study. After this study, the account was deleted by censors. Over the past decade, Ye Haiyan has been prohibited from travelling abroad and repeatedly evicted from her rental residences in Guangxi, Guangdong, Inner Mongolia, Beijing, and other places where she has tried to settle down to develop her social activism (through nongovernmental organisations) and creativity (through online writing, street performance art, painting, and so on).

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