"I am not writing about sex, but about human nature"

Body, sex and pornography in Feng Tang's "Unspeakable Trilogy"

Lavinia Benedetti

Since the early 1990s, sexuality has emerged as an increasingly significant theme in Chinese literature and popular culture. In contrast to earlier works that suppressed sexuality in favor of political fervor, authors like Wang Xiaobo (1952-1997) introduced a completely fresh perspective on sexuality, emphasizing its individual significance (Larson 2003). Two decades after the release of Wang Xiaobo's renowned novel "The Golden Years" (1991), Feng Tang (1971) astonishes Chinese readers with his unconventional treatment of sex in his novel *Bu'er,* the first of the so-called "Unspeakable Trilogy" (in the text referred to as the "Trilogy"). Beyond the controversies often surrounding Feng Tang for his unreserved approach to discussing sexuality, particularly male sexuality, this article aims to provide reflection on his poetics of sex, which often appear to aim for higher, sometimes philosophical, ends rather than merely seeking to shock or disturb the reader.

Keywords: Feng Tang; "Unspeakable Trilogy;" sexuality; body; human nature.

> It can be said that Feng Tang demystified the concept of sex, presenting it as something as ordinary as drinking tea, eating, playing the piano, or reading—an integral part of human life.
> (Zhou Xuehua 2008: 68)[1]

1. Introduction

This article focuses on three narrative works of the Beijing writer Feng Tang 冯唐 (pseudonym of Zhang Haipeng 张海鹏): *Bu'er* 不二 (lit. "Not-Two," 2011), *Tianxia luan* 天下卵 ("Of All The Balls," 2012) and *Anyang* 安阳 (2012).

[1] Unless otherwise specified, all translations from Chinese to English in this article are my own responsibility.

These three writings are defined by the author as the "Unspeakable Trilogy" (*Zi bu yu san bu qu* 子不语三部曲), though only *Bu'er* 不二 was published separately as a novel, while *Tianxia luan* 天下卵 and *Anyang* 安阳, being shorter, were included in a collection titled *Tianxia luan* (2012).[2] The name of the "Trilogy" *Zi bu yu* ("What the master would not discuss") refers to the title of a famous collection of supernatural stories compiled by Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) scholar Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716–1797), which in turn referred to a passage of the "Analects of Confucius" (*Lunyu* 论语) that states, "The Master never discussed strange phenomena, power exploits, disorder or supernatural/saints stories" (*Lunyu* 7: 21). It seems that the Master Confucius 孔子 (c. 551-c. 479 BCE), the father of Chinese thought, had talked about everything in front of his students (who would then have compiled the "Analects"), but he avoided talking about certain topics because he considered them unworthy, or perhaps only because there was nothing to discuss.

Feng Tang, therefore, like a modern Yuan Mei (who was criticized as a heretic), dedicates his "Trilogy" to themes that have been neglected by Confucian orthodoxy: *Bu'er* is set in the Tang dynasty (618-907) tells the story of Buddhist monks and nuns who achieve enlightenment through unusual means (disorder and saints), *Tianxia luan* is set in the court of a likely Liao dynasty (907-1125), follows the story of a eunuch who plots a conspiracy against the emperor (power), and finally *Anyang* which is set in the Shang dynasty (1600 BCE – 1050 BCE), tells the story of a fortune teller who loses his ability to predict the future (strange). In all three works, the exploration of the body and sexuality becomes a means of social assertion for the protagonists, whose portrayals are clearly inspired by recognizable historical figures. In some cases, these figures are entirely out of context, such as the eunuch Liu Jin 刘瑾 (1451-1510) in Tianxia luan, while in other cases, the characters are richly detailed, with insights and descriptions that are intertwined with documented sources and historical events, such as the patriarchs of Chan Buddhism and the poetess Yu Xuanji 鱼玄机 (c. 840–c. 868) in *Bu'er*. However, it is almost impossible to summarize the plots of Feng's novels, just as the critic Li Jingze 李敬泽 (1964) once said:

> There's no story or characters in Feng Tang's world. Nobody would picture himself as someone in Feng Tang's novels, and even if somebody wants to enter Feng Tang's world, he cannot find the entrance. His novels can never be adapted into any TV series or movie, because his world has no

[2] In 2020, I translated into Italian the two stories *Tianxia luan* and *Anyang,* respectively titled "Palle imperiali" and "Anyang" (Feng Tang 2020).

> power or willingness, not even lust. No one can tell which school he belongs to, and not any critic is willing to offend him---I do not remember any well-known critic who attempted to comment on him, and I do not want to get into the trouble either (*Qianyan* in Feng 2012b).[3]

Feng Tang has been called "Best Non-Professional Writer" (*Wentan wai gaoshou* 文坛外高手) because he made his debut in the literary world in 2001, after earning a PhD in gynaecology in Beijing, a degree in business in the US, and a carrier as consultant for McKinsey & Co. After that he published numerous novels, collections of essays, short stories, poems, translations, screenplays and journal articles, he has a blog[4] and podcasts[5] on *Weibo* (the biggest social media platforms in China) with thousands of followers.

In the literary panorama the first to notice him is perhaps Li Jingze, who in 2004 after reading a draft of "Give Me a Girl When I am Eighteen" (十八岁给我一个姑娘), called him the "best writer of the post-70 generation" ('70 后作家第一人), attracting the attention of other very influential critics and writers such as Bai Hua 白烨 (1952), He Shaojun 贺绍俊 (1951), Zhang Yiwu 张颐武 (1962) and Huang Jiwei 黄集伟 (1958). Just a short time later, in fact, fame arrived. In 2007, his first three novels known as the "Beijing Trilogy" (*Beijing san bu qu* 北京三部曲)— "Everything Grows" (万物生长, 2001), "Give Me a Girl When I am Eighteen" (2005) and "Beijing Beijing" (北京北京, 2007)—are selling out in bookstores in Beijing and Taiwan (Wang Duo 2007: 81).

However, his most sensational success is certainly *Bu'er*, a historical novel which departed abruptly from his earlier semi-autobiographic themes. After being rejected by as many as twenty-two publishing houses in China (too much sexual content) and Taiwan (speaks of Buddhism in a somewhat critical manner), in 2011 *Bu'er* was finally published in Hong Kong, and in just two months it became the best-selling Chinese-language novel in Hong Kong.[6] In 2013, thanks to his writings and income from his managerial work, Feng entered the list of the wealthiest Chinese writers (Wang Duo 2007: 80).

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[3] The English translation is provided by Zhang Mingjia (2016: 6). Please refer to the preface (*qianyan* 前言) authored by Li Jingze for the novel *Shiba sui gei wo yi ge guniang* (Feng Tang 2012b).

[4] Feng's blog is titled *Yong wenzi dabai shijian* 用文字打败时间 (Beat time with literature). Feng Tang uses this expression with two meanings: it suggests that a successful literary work makes its author immortal, and that literature helps overcome boredom.

[5] Some examples are *Chengshi xinfa* 成事心法 ("Psychological methods to achieve one's goals"), and *Feng Tang jiangshu* 冯唐讲书 ("Reviews by Feng Tang").

[6] *Bu'er* is still not published in mainland China, however, albeit with some censored words, it is easily found on Chinese websites.

Feng is loved/criticized for involving sexuality in almost all of his writings, including poems and essays. His vivid depiction of actual or simulated sex always arouse animated controversy. In an interview on the journal *Nanfang dushi bao* 南方都市报 September 8, 2015, Feng justifies himself by saying, "Just as some people use psychological issues, and others use chicken soup, I prefer to use human sexuality as an entry point to explore human nature" (*Nanfang dushi bao* 2015)[7].

For his emphasis on sexuality and irreverent style, he has often been compared to two other popular Pekingese writers, Wang Xiaobo 王小波 (1952-1997) and Wang Shuo 王朔 (1958; Wu Congju 2009). Yet, Feng Tang does not like to be associated with other writers, not even with the "Two Wangs" whom he recognizes as "literary heroes" (*wenxue yingxiong* 文学英雄) but who spares no criticism: "Xiaobo's appearance is a miracle; he can be considered a leading figure in literary history, but he cannot yet be considered great" (Feng Tang 2017: 49).[8] However, among those who define Feng Tang as "the Twenty-First Century Wang Xiaobo" (*21 shiji Wang Xiaobo* 21 世纪王小波), and "Wang Shuo's Successor" (*Wang Shuo chuanren* 王朔传人), there is also Xiaobo's widow Li Yinhe 李银河 (1952), who is not only one of Feng's biggest fans, but also a world-renowned sexologist. In 2009, she wrote in her blog "Feng's judgment of Xiaobo is a bit harsh," but "his books are too beautiful," and later she comes to say: "Among contemporary writers, Wang Xiaobo ranks first, followed by Feng Tang in second place" (Li Yinhe 2012).[9]

Even if Feng's openness toward sexuality has something similar with Wang Xiaobo, we have to assume that by 2011 the cultural, social and political environment had changed a great deal since the release of "The Golden Years" (*Huangjin shidai* 黄金时代, 1991). When this novel appeared in the literary world, China was experiencing enormous social, political, and economic change. The Maoist

[7] See *Feng Tang tan wenxue chuangzuo: Qingse shi ge rukou yao gei ni kan linghun* 冯唐谈文学创作：情色是个入口 要给你看灵魂 ("Feng Tang talks about literary creation: Erotica is an entrance to show you the soul"). *Nanfang dushi bao* 南方都市报, September 8, 2015: https://news.sina.cn/sh/2015-09-08/detail-ifxhqhuf8216901.d.html?vt=1 (2022-11-11).

[8] See the full chapter *Wang Xiaobo daodi you duome weida* 王小波到底有多么伟大 ("How great is Wang Xiaobo after all?"), in Feng Tang (2017: 44-49).

[9] See Li Yinhe, *Dangdai xiezuozhe zhong Wang Xiaobo di yi, Feng Tang di er* 当代写作者中王小波第一, 冯唐第二. December 4, 2012: https://weibo.com/liyinhe (2022-11-11). Li has been one of the most active promoters of Feng's work, and it is not surprising that she took his defence also in the bitter controversy that involved Feng Tang in 2015 following his translation of the Nobel laureate in Literature Rabindranath Tagore's poetry "Stray Birds." To Feng's opponents who believed that his translation had put too much emphasis on sexuality to the point of misrepresenting the original text, Li responds "Feng Tang's translation is the best Chinese translation of 'Stray Birds' so far." See Li Yinhe, 冯唐的译本是〈飞鸟集〉迄今为止最好的中文译本 (Feng Tang's translation is the best Chinese translation of "Flying Birds" so far). December 27, 2015: http: / /blog. sina. com. cn /s/blog _473d53360102wa86. html

era was over and individual needs no longer have to be totally devoted to the collective and nationalist cause, we were now in the era of reform and open-door policy. In this transitional and transforming period, sexuality has been a crucial factor for the constitution of modernity and for the re-appropriation of spaces of both power and resistance. On the one hand, the authors who had grown up during the Cultural Revolution (ca. 1966-1976) and write during the 1990s, such as Wang Xiaobo, but also Jia Pingwa 贾平凹 (1952)—just to name the most representative—show greater straightforwardness and tolerance regarding sex love concepts as a strategy to react to the previous repressive political climate and reaffirm individualism (Larson 1999: 423). As Larson has observed, *The Golden Years* depicts "an aesthetic modernity that for intellectuals is a pleasing and comforting alternative to the stressful, politicized Maoist years" (Larson 2003: 37).

On the other hand, the social demand for a more open sex policy of those years[10] gave impetus to a new way of conceiving sexual activity and human desires also within academic circles, which felt the need to establish a new approach to sexology.[11] Chinese cultural and literary studies, for the past thirty years, have been profoundly involved in debates surrounding the body and sexuality. These matters are echoed not only in an abundance of broadly theoretical publications, but also in more specific studies focusing on individual works and authors.

Nowadays neither the global landscape nor the very idea of sex are the same as they were in the 1990s. Although in the past thirty years the state has formalized regulatory bodies and periodically launches initiatives to inhibit the circulation of any kind of videos, images, literature, and audio that feature sexual content—not to mention pornography that is strictly prohibited[12]—these efforts to purge "social evils" have been often ineffective or even hypocritical, especially in urban areas where the sex and pornography market is flourishing.

When Feng Tang published *Bu'er,* discussing sex wasn't as unusual and startling as it was when Wang Xiaobo published his book. Discussions about sexual desire and orgasm, even female orgasm, were topics that could be found in a blog, a work of art, or a novel. Just think of the case of Muzi Mei 木

[10] In the winter of 1986-1987, many nationwide demonstrations by university students asked for a more open sex policy which were considered crucial to the modernization of the country. See Fang Furuan (1991: 9).

[11] An example is the pioneer study of Fang Furuan (1991).

[12] Since 1997, a series of laws and campaigns targeting pornography have been implemented. The penalties for such offenses vary depending on the severity and scope of the crime, and can range from monetary fines to multiple years of imprisonment. See Sixthtone 2016 (2020-12-01).

子美 (1978), who already in 2004 put a highly explicit log of her very active sex life online.[13] So ubiquitous in the Internet age, art and literature once rejected as pornography have become a lively, inventive art form, widely consumed, openly debated and seriously reviewed.

So, in contemporary Chinese hyper-consumer society, where beyond the restrictions of the government, the connection between sex, individuality and media is quite evident, what more can Feng Tang's sexual representations tell to the Chinese readers?

Starting from some famous statements of the writer, this article will try to discuss the contribution that Feng Tang's "Unspeakable Trilogy" has made to the Chinese literature and specifically to the erotic literature. We will delve into how Feng strategically employs explicit sexual and pornographic depictions, often linked with "lowbrow" literature, to assert his presence within a wider philosophical debate on the essence of human nature.

2. "Why do I write pornographic books?"

On November 23, 2005, with a post on his blog entitled "My forbidden reading on winter nights" (*Xueye zhen bian du jinshu* 雪夜枕边读禁书), Feng Tang announces to his readers his intention to write a pornographic book. Six years later, in the summer, Feng finally realizes his dream with the release of *Bu'er* in Hong Kong bookstores.

It was not the first time that Feng included sexuality in his works; indeed, there is no doubt that he owes part of his success to his controversial use of erotic descriptions. So, what distinguishes *Bu'er* from his previous literary works? To answer this question, we must necessarily start from what I consider the manifesto of pornographic literature, namely the article "Why Do I Write Pornographic Books?" (*Wo weishenme xie huangshu* 我为什么写黄书), published first on his blog and then in *Bu'er*'s afterword (Feng Tang 2011: 211-214).

But first, let's focus a second on the term *huangshu* 黄书 ("yellow books"), which in the Chinese context refers to pornographic books. The yellow color in ancient China had always carried a strong positive connotation since it was associated with the emperor's persona and the origins of Chinese civilization in the plain of the Yellow River. However, at the beginning of the Republican era (1911), Chinese newspapers influenced by the US press began to use it as synonymous for sensationalist

[13] Muzi Mei's blog has been censored, but many young Chinese have managed to see it. See the interview https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leS6hCwy308 (2022-11-11).

investigations, and shortly thereafter for gossip, stories of crimes, violence, and sexual transgressions. The definitive semantic transformation occurred at the end of World War II, due to the yellow binding of the French Belle Époque books dedicated to sexually salacious material (Huang Xingtao and Chen Peng 2010: 95).

It was important to dwell on this, because when Feng says "yellow books" he does not mean just erotic, but something that is transgressive and explicit, such as pornographic literature.

So why does Feng write pornographic books? As is his habit, Feng answers by points:[14]

> First, since *Rouputuan*, there has not been a good Chinese pornographic book in the past 300 years. But even Li Yu is too bigoted...
>
> Second, it is not easy to write a pornographic book, and writing it without being dirty or in a way that is as simple and beautiful as eating, drinking, basking in the sun, and taking a nap, is even more difficult...
>
> Third, ...Why can't a good drama be mixed with a porn movie? Wouldn't that give a complete picture of the beauty of life?
>
> Fourth, I'm almost forty years old. If I don't start writing it right now, in a few years, my heart will be frozen, and I'll just be able to drink porridge and leaks rice...
>
> Fifth, ...As a Chinese writer, I would feel guilty if our young people grew up with Japanese porn movies and foreign readings, like *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Under the Roof of Paris*.
>
> Sixth, I hope it helps me to overcome my midlife crisis (Feng Tang 2011: 211).

What distinguishes *Bu'er* from his previous works is therefore the end. While in novels like "Beijing Trilogy" sexuality is widely represented but still lies on the side of the narrative, in *Bu'er, Tianxia luan* and *Anyang* sexual descriptions are at the centre of the narrative, aiming to break once and for all with those taboos that still exist about sex. Nowadays there is indeed much more openness toward sexuality, but despite this, the numerous controversies surrounding Feng's works prove that sex is still something "known-to-all yet hardly being talked about" (Zhou Xuehua 2008: 68). It is no coincidence that the most unmentionable sexual habits are explored in the "Trilogy," such as masturbation, fellatio, sexual fantasies, and strange perversions. According to Feng, sex must not be described in an allusive way, but in a direct, trivial, authentic way, because vulgar is the true nature of human desire. The lack of this triviality, in favour of lyrical and allusive descriptions of sex in literature, is what, according to Feng, has prevented literature from fully and truthfully representing human nature.

[14] Feng confessed to me that because of his habit of answering by points, his friends call him "Feng-three points" (Feng-*sandian* 冯三点).

3. "I'm not writing about sex, but about human nature"

The most common criticism of Feng's works is their overemphasis on the penis and male sexuality, to the point that some readers have accused him to have *Zhinan ai* (直男癌), that means "straight man cancer," a derogatory neologism coined by internet users referring to men who are stubbornly in favour of traditional gender roles and devalue and objectify women.

Indeed, in most of Feng Tang's works, male genitalia are prominently depicted. For example, in the *Tianxia luan* story alone, which has less than twenty-five thousand characters, the terms to define the penis (*jiba* 鸡巴, *yinjing* 阴茎) are named 23 times, while the testicles (*luan* 卵, *gaowan* 睾丸) are named 36 times, compared with only 8 times reserved for the female sexual organ (*yindao* 阴道, *yinmen* 阴门, *yindi* 阴蒂). In *Anyang*, which is much shorter, we have seven references to the penis (*jiba*, *guitou* 龟头) and none to the female organ. An exception must be made for the novel *Bu'er*, in which female sexuality is much more represented, given that one of the protagonists is a woman.

The omnipresence of the penis in Feng's works has often been interpreted as a demonstration of phallocentrism. Indeed, the penis and testicles in *Tianxia luan* symbolically represent power, but it is noticeable that at the end of the story, it is the eunuch Liu Jin who prevails over all the other men. In a society where power is intended to be male-dominated, Liu Jin's social and political ascent occurs solely through the mutilation of the symbols of masculinity. Although this alone would be enough to refute the thesis of phallocentrism in Feng Tang (describing male sexuality does not necessarily imply phallocentrism), it is noteworthy that the pornographic imagery typically portrays the female body as a tool for male pleasure. However, in *Tianxia luan*, the narrative shifts, placing the male body at the forefront, exposed to humiliation and even violence, including instances of rape. This departure from the norm invites scrutiny of the male body, laying bare its vulnerabilities and psychological depths for all to see.

This is what Feng meant when he said "I'm Not Writing About Sex, But About Human Nature" (*Wo xie de bu shi xing, shi renxing* 我写的不是性，是人性)? (Yin Weiying 2015).[15]

Reflection on human nature (*renxing* 人性) has always played an important role in Chinese intellectual debate,[16] and it's in this framework that we will try to understand Feng's statement. Indeed, the emphasis on sex, the body and the phallus within the "Trilogy" can be understood as a criticism of

[15] See Yin Weiying 尹维颖's interview on Jingbao 晶報, Agoust 08.

[16] To deepen the debate on human nature in early Confucian though, see Scarpari (2003).

the progressive disappearance of the body from Chinese literature, and of a dichotomous vision of human nature which conceives the mind and the body, mental and physical, reason and heart as two distinct organs.

Generally speaking, this dualistic perspective is attributed to modern "Western" philosophy, while we know that Chinese traditional thought adopted a more holistic approach by understanding "heart" and "mind" as one *xin* 心: "the core of affective and cognitive structure, conceived of as having the capacity for logical reasoning, rational understanding, moral will, intuitive imagination, and aesthetic feeling, unifying human will, desire, emotion, intuition, reason and thought" (Yu Ning 2007: 28).

While this is true in general terms,[17] it also needs to be considered the emphasis that Confucian orthodoxy throughout imperial history has given to philosophy, lyricism and historiography (intellectual activity), overshadowing the value of all those literary genres that were not openly written to educate the reader but instead to give him pleasure and entertain (body activity), such as erotic literature, but also narrative itself. This did not prevent the emergence of the "cult of *qing*" (feeling, love, passion) at the end of Ming era (1368-1644), nor the explosion of pornographic and erotic literature across a variety of forms—fiction, popular song, drama, etc. However, despite the influence of notable Chinese erotica masterpieces from the Ming and Qing periods (1644-1911), such as *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 and *Rouputuan* 肉蒲团 in reshaping the perception of the place of desire (Huang 2011, Brook 1999), it proved insufficient to dismantle the puritanism advocated by Confucian orthodoxy, as observed by Feng Tang.[18]

It has been said that, when this kind of scandalous novel emerged in the book market, people from every class or clan desired to read them, "even the blind attempted to hire a good storyteller to read these novels once in their lifetime" (Tangyuenyong 2017: 99). When the Qing court realized that they could endanger people's morality and eventually threaten the family institution (considered the basis of Confucian society), they were banned. For different reasons, they were also banned during Mao's era, and even when they were reprinted in the 1980s, much of their sexually explicit passages had been purged or modified. Feng remembers an episode from his childhood:

[17] On mind–body relationship in Chinese and Western thought, see Slingerland (2013), Raphals (2017).

[18] In *Sanshiliu da*, a collection of open letters written by Feng Tang to people and things he considers illustrious, we find the letter to Li Yu 李渔 (1611–1680), traditionally considered the author of *Rouputuan.* In this letter, entitled *Daxian* 大闲 ("To the hero of leisure"), Feng, on the one hand, highlights the merits of *Rouputuan*, but on the other hand criticizes the excessive moralism of the novel. See Feng Tang (2012: Ch. 28).

> I discovered sex thanks to a copy of the *Sanyan erpai* [Ming vernacular story collections] published by the Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House. Since it was a photographic print, it was not censored [...] I told my mother "I want to buy it", she asked "why?", I replied "to learn Classical Chinese" ("My forbidden reading..." in Feng Tang 2017: 5).

The spontaneity of Ming and Qing narratives in dealing with sex has never been recovered according to Feng Tang, not even by the sex-love narratives of the 1990s with their great straightforwardness and tolerance toward sexual concepts. As Feng often lamented "I don't know exactly when it happened, but real sex and desire have long since been erased [from Chinese literature]" ("About Erotism...," in Feng 2005b: 97). That caused "a schizophrenia" (*jingshen fenliezheng* 精神分裂症) in the mind of the reader (Feng Tang 2017: 28).[19]

Therefore, in order to rehabilitate the value of the body—or rather the "lower part of the body" (*xiaban shen* 下半身) –, Feng Tang brings "the real sex and desire" back into literature. In a letter titled *Wo de huangshu lixiang* 我的黄书理想 ("My pornographic book ideal") written before completing *Bu'er,* Feng writes:

> [My book must be] enough to masturbate at least once. No illustrations are needed, I'm a great fan of fantasy. It has to be a genuine, beautiful and authentic pornographic book: as genuine as a man's yearning to remove a woman's undergarments, as beautiful as the delicate dewdrops adorning a flower's pistil, and as authentic as indulging in a feast when famished (*Wo de huangshu lixiang,* in Feng Tang 2005b: 115).

Here, as other scholars have already pointed out (Wang Duo 2018), Feng is similar to the so-called "Lower Body Literature" (*xiaban shen xiezuo* 下半身写作), a literary trend (especially poetry) born between the late 90s and early 2000s, which use carnality and spontaneity as a tool to give a more authentic representation of human being, challenging the "Upper Body Literature" (*shangban shen xiezuo* 上半身写作), which deals with the intellect, culture, lyricism and philosophy (Shen Haobo 2002).

However, Feng's intention is not to confront or oppose the "Upper Body Literature" by presenting content aligned with the "Lower Body Literature." Rather, its objective is to merge the two literary forms, in order to give a complete depiction of human nature. Therefore, the human body, sexual activities, sexual desires, sexual fantasies, and even perversions, all undergo a process of normalization within his literature, they are all "natural" expressions of the human being, all the human beings,

[19] See the entire chapter *Haose er yin, fei yuan er shang* 好色而淫，悱怨而伤 ("Lustful and lascivious, sorrowful and wounded") in Feng Tang (2017: 27-30).

without exception. As expressed in the third point of the aforementioned manifesto: "Why can't a good drama be mixed with a porn movie? Wouldn't that give a complete picture of the beauty of life?"

In this regard, Feng Tang aims to reclaim the traditional Chinese worldview based on the interconnectedness of the body-mind. If the body and mind are inherently linked, with one not existing without the other, then sexuality must also be understood as something that encompasses both mental and physical activities. Sexuality belongs to both realms, the mental and the carnal, possessing both a lyrical and vulgar dimension. It is for this reason that readers, when engaging with the novels of Feng's "Unspeakable Trilogy," particularly in relation to their depictions of sexuality, perceive sudden shifts in tone. The narrative transitions from references to Classic literature to the vulgar language employed by the protagonists. It also fluctuates from sterile descriptions of genitalia to explicit pornographic scenes intended to arouse the reader, and from poetic imagery of the genitals to horrifying depictions of mutilated bodies.

What Feng Tang attempts to achieve through his literature, which is unabashedly pornographic yet exquisitely poetic, is not to substitute or juxtapose low literature against high literature, the lower body against the upper body, the informal against the formal, the vulgar against the lofty. Instead, his aim is to create a new genre that encompasses both, drawing inspiration from the traditionally holistic view of human nature. If the body and mind are inseparable, sexuality becomes an expression of both the body and the mind. In this sense, representing sexuality equates to representing human nature itself.

4. "I prefer to use human sexuality as a starting point to explore human nature"

We shall now scrutinize the literary devices employed by Feng Tang to articulate his distinctive conceptualization of human nature through the lens of human sexuality.

4.1. Unity of nature and human('s body)

The first aspect that captivates attention when delving into Feng Tang's "Trilogy" is his conception of the individual as an integral part of the surrounding world. The world constructed by Feng Tang in *Tianxia luan*, *Anyang*, and *Bu'er* is a realm where humanity and nature converge, intertwining and communicating with one another. In this context, humans are not merely constituents of nature but also possess a heightened sensitivity to the messages conveyed by the universe, reflecting their own essence through natural manifestations.

This idea of human beings as an integral part of nature once again seeks to evoke the ancient concept of "Unity of Nature and Humans" (*Tian ren heyi* 天人合一), as expressed in the Chinese philosophical classics. *Tian ren heyi*, often translated also as "Unity of Heaven and Humans," encapsulates a profound philosophical notion within Chinese thought. Generally speaking, it signifies the inseparable union and harmonious integration of the celestial realm (heaven or nature) and human existence. Rather than perceiving a dichotomy between the natural world and the human realm, this concept emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of all phenomena. It implies that the actions and experiences of human beings are not isolated from the larger cosmic order but are intertwined with the rhythms and principles of the universe. It encompasses the idea that understanding one's own nature and aligning it with the principles of the universe leads to a balanced and virtuous life (Zhu Zhirong 2022: 127 ff.).

This concept encapsulates a perspective commonly found in traditional Chinese literature, wherein the universe is depicted as inherently ordered and predisposed towards human understanding. One can consider, for instance, narratives from the Ming and Qing periods, where virtuous individuals are capable of deciphering celestial messages and communicating with beings from the otherworldly realm (Benedetti 2010).

In modern times, Chinese authors, influenced by Western postmodernism, evolved from the traditional "anthropocentrism" to a post-modern view for which the return to the primitive and nature become a way to express dissatisfaction with the present reality. This has found a specific place in the texts of the so-called New Period novelists, such as Su Tong 苏童, Ge Fei 格非 and Mo Yan 莫言, who express disgust for artificial things by recalling past and natural things (Wang Ning 2018).

In Feng's works the nostalgia for the past is expressed in a return to a bygone era in which education and taboo had not yet altered the traditional concept of *Tian ren heyi* for which humans and nature's relationship was spontaneous, symbiotic and direct. Given that for Feng Tang describing the human nature is synonymous with exploring human sexuality, it is not only through the mind that Feng's characters communicate with nature but also through the body.

The corporeal realm serves as a conduit for dialogue and interaction between human beings and the encompassing forces of the natural world. Through intimate and sensual experiences, Feng's characters establish a profound connection with the rhythms and energies of the universe, transcending the boundaries of individual existence to merge with the larger cosmic fabric. In this way, the body becomes a vessel for understanding, communion, and self-realization. Through the exploration of human sexuality, Feng Tang portrays a narrative in which the physicality of the characters becomes a channel for harmonious integration with the natural order. He recovers the

"Unity of Nature and Humans" conception found in traditional literature, and evolved it to "Unity of Nature and Human('s Body)," from anthropocentrism to bodycentrism, whereby the human body becomes the measure for understanding nature, just as nature is the measure for understanding the body.

In the "Unspeakable Trilogy," this worldview is conveyed through a plethora of rhetorical figures that highlight the sometimes highly imaginative resemblance between the natural world and the human body, as in:

> Her pubic hair swayed like the leaves of the sacred fig tree, the vulva opened and closed like a lotus flower. Her lips had been moist for a while, sticky like the fluff on the back of lotus leaves on a rainy day. The smell they were releasing was discreet but pervasive (Feng 2011: 15).

Similarly, parts of the human body are often used to describe natural phenomena, such as:

> The sun sets in the West, it is red and round like the open wound of an emasculated penis (*Tianxia luan,* in Feng 2012c: 18).

Lastly, the narrative features characters who, through their sexual experiences, gain a heightened understanding of natural signs and symbology, such as:

> The night Zhenya penetrated a pussy for the first time, the sky was much brighter than usual. He immediately rushed out of the room screaming, *I felt a tremor, there will be an earthquake, there will be an earthquake*! (*Anyang* in Feng 2012c: 70).

4.2. Human sexuality seen from within the body

In addition to exploring the relationship between the human (body) and nature, Feng Tang offers a unique perspective on human sexuality within the "Trilogy," delving into it from within the human body. Using his knowledge of medicine (Feng holds a PhD in gynaecology), Feng is able to describe the chemistry and physics behind basic body functions. Under his pen, the body is described as if it is in a medical book and the reader is a student who is observing it through a magnifying glass. The genital organs are obviously chiefly represented, mainly the male one, and attention is given to bodily secretions (mainly sperm) which may make the reader feel disgusted and shameful. As in the following depiction of the male orgasm:

> The seminal fluid, when the signal exceeds the threshold, triggers the contraction of the epididymis and the vas deferens, pushing sperm towards the posterior urethra. Contraction of the peripheral smooth muscle of the prostate, contraction of the seminal vesicles, secretion of prostatic and seminal fluid, propel the seminal fluid forward. Contraction of the ischiocavernosus and

> bulbocavernosus muscles causes a rhythmic increase in internal pressure of the erectile tissues, expelling the seminal fluid from the urethra outside the body. Externally, onto the vagina, mouth, breasts, or stomach of the woman. A tissue is used to wipe the semen from the vagina, mouth, breasts, or stomach, and then discarded into the sewer system (*Tianxia luan* in Feng 2012c: 18).

There is a subtle irony in dealing with certain topics in such a direct way, as if the writer is making fun of social taboos by talking about things that are fascinating and repellent at the same time. This rehabilitation of disgust through the tool of irony places Feng in the still current debate on the role of disgust in literature and art,[20] drawing attention to the fact that—as Freud affirmed—the frisson of fascination comes in the private space, whereas repulsion belongs to the public. Just like the so-called *Abject,* or *Post-organic* artworks that since the 1980s have populated museums and galleries all around the world, Feng uses images that transgress our sense of decorum as a tool to dismantle taboos and provide a more sincere and authentic version of reality. Here is another example:

> Bu'er distinctly heard the sound of Hongren's right big toe slam against the sole of his boot, the sartorial muscle in his left thigh stiffen, the piliferous bulbs contract, the hairs on his scrotum stand up like swords, the penis rise like a pagoda. A drop of semen escaped and clung to his robe, creating a thin thread of semen that went up and down like a dewdrop hesitating to detach itself from the bamboo leaf (Feng 2011: 23-24).

Feng Tang's exploration of human sexuality encompasses not only references to Western medicine but also draws inspiration from the principles of Chinese traditional medicine. In *Tianxia luan*, for example, Liu Jin, the emperor's personal doctor, advises him to use the "Master's sexual battle," a method for delaying male ejaculation and enhancing pleasure for the woman. This practice can be found in the eighth-century handbook "True Manual of the Perfected Equalization."[21]

> Following Liu Jin's instructions, he brandishes the dagger and begins to move it, from side to side, inside and out, slow and fast. He very carefully chops Ruxue's pussy, pushing the tip of the blade into every corner of the vagina. The blade sinks by one finger, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight fingers. Beyond the eight fingers, when the tip of the blade reaches the cervix, Ruxue emits a meow, a spring dew spray bursts violently. In that moment, the emperor stops, counts down to nine, and then pulls out his penis, which is still straight as a dagger (*Tianxia luan* in Feng 2012c: 45-46).

Finally, the texts also include various passages that emphasize the interplay between the mind and bodily reactions, specifically by describing the imaginative processes occurring in the brain during sexual arousal. In this context, particular emphasis is placed on adolescent sexuality, as exemplified in

[20] For the role of disgust in art, see Feloj (2021: 326-342).

[21] For more information on this text, see Fang Furuan (1991: 59-61).

the following instances: the first depicts a young boy's first erotic dream, foretelling his future career as a diviner; the second portrays the erotic fantasy of a young monk:

> That year at the end of spring, Zhenya had his first nocturnal ejaculation. He asked his father: "In my dream the penis was swollen like when I have to pee, I looked for a tree but I couldn't piss. In the end, I got it on myself. But it wasn't pee! What was it? What should I do?" (*Tianxia luan* in Feng 2012c: 70).

> Bu'er imagined using the urethral orifice to smell and touch Xuanji's head. [...] Caressing her shaved head, her short and hard hair stimulated the skin of his glans, which swelled and stretched. At that moment, he felt that Xuanji's hair began to lengthen, until it became a thick and heavy bun, in which Bu'er sank the entire penis: the glans, the frenulum, the foreskin, the rod, the scrotum. A tangle of pubic hair and hair now covered his penis. Bu'er began to poke up and down in that soft bun, which after a few strokes became a mass of dishevelled hair that imprisoned his penis (Feng 2011: 40).

4.3. The universality of sexuality

One final significant device employed by Feng Tang to depict human nature is the portrayal of the universality of sexuality. Within the "Trilogy," many characters, despite their elevated social status as members of the *élite*, exhibit vulgarity and sexual depravity. Examples include an emperor whose preoccupation with sex overshadows his governance (*Tianxia luan*), Buddhist patriarchs seduced by the allure of a nun (*Bu'er*), and a fortune-teller who regains his supernatural abilities after engaging in sexual intercourse (*Anyang*). Feng occasionally employs satire to poke fun at these characters, evoking the ironic tone often reserved for individuals fixated on sexual desires in Ming-era erotic literature. An exemplary case is Prince Miguli 迷骨离 in *Tianxia luan*, who, constantly craving sex, stands out as one of the most hilarious characters in the novel.

> Prince Miguli hid on one side of the main hall, standing on the shoulders of two eunuchs, peeping through the window as the beautiful women filed out. His eyes were wide open, and saliva dripped down. Miguli muttered to himself, 'Wow, she's good, and so is she.' Miguli asked the two eunuchs below him, 'Why can my father choose, but I can't?'" (*Tianxia luan* in Feng 2015: 25).

Conversely, through irony, Feng seems to convey the notion that everyone, regardless of social class, harbours sexual desires, even unconventional ones. There exists no distinction between the noble and the humble, the virtuous and the foolish; they all think the same thing in their hearts and do the same thing in bed.

Another way to highlight the universal dimension of sexuality is through the incorporation of quotations from classical literature. By doing so, sexuality becomes a domain that transcends cultural and temporal boundaries, as sexual desire is something experienced by all and even documented by

ancient writers. Feng Tang skilfully integrates quotes from a wide range of sources, including historical, narrative, and even poetic texts, lending an elevated tone to his portrayal of sexuality. Through these citations, that allude (or could allude) to sexual activities, he highlights the universality of human sexual experiences and establishes a connection between contemporary narratives and the rich literary traditions of the past.

One last example can be observed in *Bu'er*, where a plethora of quotations from Tang literature are skilfully integrated. Below is the passphrase that the assistants of the Daoist nun Xuanji demand from clients as a prerequisite for entry into the Convent Xianyi, which is portrayed in the novel as a kind of brothel.

> One of the two girls recited the line, "Tell me could we play the flute, riding a phoenix to the sky?" and clients had to answer, "Did we learn dancing, wasting all our youth years and not shy?" (Feng 2011: 89).

This is a Tang-era *qilü* (ballad of seven-character lines) titled "Memories of Chang'an" (*Changan guyi* 长安古意)[22] written by Lu Zhaolin 卢照邻 (634?-689). The image of a girl who plays the flute (*chuixiao* 吹箫) is very likely a metaphor that alludes to fellatio.[23]

4. Conclusion

This article has tried to discuss Feng's works by changing the framework in which he is usually studied. Studies on his sexual representations usually enlighten four aspects:

1. The similarity with Wang Xiaobo, and more generally with the sex-love narrative of the 90s (Wu Congju 2010);
2. The connection with the other authors born in the 70s (Zhou Xuehua 2008, Xu Qingzhuo 2015), or with other literary trends such as the "Lower Body Literature" (Wang Duo 2016);
3. The subversive value of his works (Dong Xiaoxia 2010);
4. Phallocentrism (Zhang Mingjia 2016).

My analysis of the "Unspeakable Trilogy" has identified the following aspects:

1. The author's will to distance himself from modern and contemporary literature, and to connect to traditional Chinese literature, of which Feng imitates the style and philosophical assumptions.

[22] Thanks to Alan Ma for the translation in English, see: http://chinesepoetryinenglishverse.blogspot.com/2013/12/blog-post_10.html.

[23] See: https://www.wikisexguide.com/wiki/Mandarin_Sex_Phrasebook

Feng not only uses the ancient past as a setting, that is usual in traditional narrative but quite unusual for the authors of his generation (Zong Renfa, Shi Zhanjun, Li Jingze 2000), but he also imitates the style of traditional narrative by using a refined language, enriching the narration with implicit or explicit cultured quotations, and building a manageable world inclined to human understanding.

2. Feng seems quite uninterested in the individual, but he is rather interested in human nature, in what all human beings have in common. In *Bu'er* in particular, where the narrative is centred on the descriptions of the body and sex, the plot of the story and the characters seem to recede into the background, until they almost disappear. If as Larson argued "Zhang Xianliang's novels go from history to the individual, searching for the individual's place within history; Wang Xiaobo's novels go from the individual to history, and revolution becomes a background", Feng Tang goes from individual to humanity, and sexuality becomes a tool to uncover the human nature.
3. More than just telling a story, Feng's "Trilogy" seems focused on addressing existential and philosophical issues. This article has highlighted his contribution to the philosophical debate on human nature, breathing new life into and reshaping the traditional holistic view of nature.
4. The tendency is not to shock readers, but rather to cultivate an inclination towards a more genuine, discerning, and organic understanding of one's own body and sexual impulses.
5. The "Trilogy" is an unprecedented attempt to raise the status of pornographic literature. Through the use of explicit sexual and pornographic descriptions, Feng aims to position himself at the centre of a broader and elevated scholarly discourse. By incorporating these unconventional elements into his work, Feng explores the profound depths of human existence, challenging conventional boundaries and prompting contemplation on the intricacies of our shared humanity. Through this intentional fusion of pornographic imagery and philosophical inquiry, Feng endeavours to illuminate the complexities of the human condition, encouraging readers to critically examine their own understanding of what it means to be human.
6. The concept behind the "Trilogy" seeks to go beyond cliché, restoring dignity to the male erotic imagination. It aims to understand and decode its complexities, including its perversions, frustrations, and desires, while allowing for the free expression of fantasies and an acknowledgment of vulnerabilities. It strives to give a voice to a segment of erotic literature that has been culpably silenced for too long: the male body.

Perhaps, as the author desires, "in four hundred years, people will still remember *Jin Ping Mei*, *Rouputuan*, and *Bu'er*" (Feng 2012: Ch. 28) as three masterpieces of erotic literature.

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Lavinia Benedetti is Associate Professor in Chinese language and literature at the University of Catania. Her field of research is literature and cultural studies. She has worked on crime fiction and erotica. Among her latest publications: Benedetti *et al.* (eds), *Stigma, censure e oscenità. L'indicibile nelle culture del Mediterraneo e dell'Asia Orientale* (2020); *Feng Tang. Palle Imperiali e altri racconti* (trad. 2020); and *Storia del Giallo in Cina. Dai racconti giudiziari al romanzo di crimine* (2017).
Lavinia can be contacted at: lavinia.benedetti@gmail.com