

Gillian Dooley

‘Twenty-nine is a truly awkward age. You don’t know if you’re still a girl, or if you’re already a woman.’ This is about as deep as Wei Hui gets in her latest novel, *Marrying Buddha*.

It’s a little difficult to know how to approach this book. Presumably it has been translated into English from the original Chinese, though no translator is acknowledged, and this might account for some passages which read strangely. However, there’s no disguising the vapidity and self-indulgence of *Marrying Buddha*.

The narrator, Coco, is transparently the author herself. She explains that her best-selling novel *Shanghai Baby*, banned in China, led her (how it is not clear) to move to New York, just in time for the September 11 2001 attacks. Fortunately her robust ego prevented any psychic trauma from the event: ‘In the wake of 9/11, I struggled with the difficulties of trying to promote the American edition of *Shanghai Baby*.’

Coco’s main interests are sex, clothes and food. In New York she meets the perfect man, Muju, a part-Italian Japanese. Muju introduces her to exotic Japanese sexual practices and Italian food. He forgives her attempt to cook him a meal, which nearly ends in burning down his apartment. There is a cringefully tacky moment when they hire a black prostitute to make a threesome. ‘I made Mimi turn over, face down, lying across the middle of the bed, and lay down on top of her … she was our pillow, a sexual pillow made of flesh and blood.’ Coco loves the sound of ripping silk, and often induces her
lovers to rip her tight, exquisitely tailored qipao dresses from her body as part of the foreplay. The impression of a spoiled child who has far too much money is inescapable.

But wait, Muju turns out not to be perfect after all. He refuses to drive her – or anyone else – to and from the airport. And then, to add insult to injury, he makes a mild criticism of her arrogance to a waiter. She decides this affair has an uncertain future and returns to Shanghai to wait for Muju to come to his senses and apologise. This in spite of the fabulous tantric sex, the great meals they eat together, and his wonderful dress sense.

Back in China, she decides to revisit her birthplace on Putuo Island, quaintly named The Temple of Righteous Rain and inhabited by an aged caricature of a monk named The Master of Empty Nature. Here she finds a kind of inner peace which leads her to the conclusion that she must marry Buddha. Quite what that might mean is obscure, but it sounds good.

The best feature of Marrying Buddha is the quotes heading each chapter. Drawn from wide-ranging sources including Confucius, Lao-tzu and Bridget Jones’ Diary, they are many times wiser and wittier than anything in the text that follows.