



Annual Conference 2011

*“Frontiers of Knowledge - Health, Environment and the History of Science”*

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**Liyang Sun (Heidelberg):**

**“Nationalism, Athleticism, Phryneism and Transculturality:  
Changing Notions and Visual Representations of ‘Healthy Bodies’  
in Chinese Pictorials (1900s-1940s)”**

As much as the “body,” the notion of the “healthy body” is also a constructed “cultural fact.” Serving as the narrative of a visual itinerary, this paper will address firstly, the changing notions and visual representations of “healthy bodies” reflected in Chinese pictorials in the 1910s-40s; and secondly, the cultural flows observed in the process of their formation.

In the Late Qing (late 19<sup>th</sup> century), the “healthy body” was often attached to nationalist discourses and visually represented as an opposite category to “the Sick man of (East) Asia” *Dongya bingfu*. By contrast, the “healthy body” from the mid-1920s onwards, I argue, was no longer merely a medical and physical ideal, but also strongly promoted as an aesthetically and materially appreciated object. This changing notion was well supported by the emergence of a fixed term for this body, “healthy and beautiful” *jianmei* and corresponding visual representations of this body, especially photographs, advertisements, and satirical images in pictorials. By examining images labelled as “healthy and beautiful” *jianmei*, the paper traces some of the indispensable elements involved in its construction. The term *jianmei*, I argue, was the Chinese version of a globally circulated ideology, which was foremost inspired by German body culture, such as *Freikörperkultur* (nudism); at the same time, the term also drew on the French and Hollywood erotic visual industry. The flourishing of *jianmei* reflected a collective anxiety to cope with the national crisis in the 1930s on the one hand; on the other, it also contained features of “phryneism” and “athleticism” as typical of a consumer society.

**Panel “Between Beauty and Health: Visual Itineraries of Changing Bodies in China’s Transcultural Mediascapes (1900s-2000s)”:**

2011/10/06 (Thursday) – 13:30-15:00

**Venue:** Neue Aula