Liying 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 19th 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 indispensible 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