

Research Project

## **No Parallels? The Fatherly Bodies of Gandhi and Mao**

### **Description**

The project “No Parallels? The Fatherly Bodies of Gandhi and Mao” is a continuation of the project “Embodying the Nation - Representations of Gandhi and Mao”, a collaboration between Barbara Mittler (Heidelberg) and Sumathi Ramaswamy (Duke). The project focuses on two hyper-visible male protagonists of the twentieth century—Mohandas K. Gandhi (the “Mahatma,” great soul, and “Bapu,” father), and Mao Zedong (“The Great Leader,” and “Chairman”)—to pose a fundamental question: How have these flesh-and-blood men been transformed through the work of visual imagery into globally recognizable, transcultural “bio-icons” (Ghosh 2011). The research component of this collaboration includes the development of an open intelligent archive and an online exhibition on the making of these two “Global Heroes.” The teaching component will result in the creation of syllabi and teaching modules on visual history and digital humanities to be tested in classroom settings at Duke, Stanford and in Heidelberg.

### **Abstract**

It is our aim to demonstrate that images and pictures are constitutive rather than merely reflective or illustrative of the histories that produce them. Using images we are able to interrupt the flow of text-based historical narratives, to ask new questions, and to produce new theoretical and conceptual arguments. It is our conviction that we must speak back against the enormous mistrust of images that saturates the social sciences more generally, in creating new and productive archives that will “blast” open historians’ legendary dependence on the authority of the word and the text. In our collaborative project “No Parallels? The Fatherly Bodies of Gandhi and Mao” built around these two global icons, we interrogate this assumption by exploring how these two paradigmatic “peasant” nationalists have been transformed into hyper-visible “bio-icons.” In our exploration of how the long traditions of Indian and Chinese iconophilia leads to what philosopher Bruno Latour has productively characterized as “iconoclasm,” we consider how such practices have turned the flesh-and-blood bodies of Gandhi and Mao into spectacles in public and performative contexts and made them into veritable “fathers of the nation.” The corporeal appears to have been critical to the affective and ethical hold that these men (and others like them) have had over their constituencies and beyond, even while it made them vulnerable to caricature or ridicule as well. Consciously adopting a contrapuntal methodological approach that draws together within a single frame two “Asian” life trajectories that have more often than not been kept apart (“No Parallel!”), the project considers how critical images and signature image-

events have contributed to a complex interplay between the iconization and the demonization of these men.

### **Related past projects**

Since 2008, Barbara Mittler and Sumathi Ramaswamy have worked together with other scholars and students in an inter-disciplinary visual studies team at Heidelberg dedicated to the rigorous understanding of the transcultural travels and reach of images and art practices across Asia and Europe ([Archiving Mothers and Fathers of the Nation in Europe and Asia: Developing a Digitized Prototype of Braided Pictorial Histories](#) (pilot project), [Transcultural Visuality](#) (project completed)). Over the past year, they have taught a unit of a graduate seminar at Duke focused on the funerals of Gandhi and Mao. They also co-organized a workshop at the [Stanford Humanities Center](#) where they invited scholars from the United States and Europe who work on other similar “fatherly figures” such as George Washington and Nelson Mandela. They have also co-taught and convened another workshop in Heidelberg, re-evaluating the Weberian concept of “charisma” in light of recent scholarship on global icons ([Artful Bodies: Charisma and the Aesthetics of Power](#)).

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*Project Supervisors:* Prof. Dr. Barbara Mittler, Prof. Dr. Sumathi Ramaswamy

Workshop Series

## **Fatherly and Motherly Bodies—the Making of “Global Icons”**

This workshop series is part of a collaborative project in which we—a Sinologist (Mittler, Heidelberg) and a historian of India (Ramaswamy, India)—take up for comparative analysis the political iconographies that have developed around two hyper-visible male protagonists of the twentieth century: Mohandas K. Gandhi and Mao Zedong. In our project, we pose a fundamental question: How have these flesh-and-blood men been transformed through the work of visual imagery into globally recognizable, transcultural “bio-icons” (cf. Bishnupriya Ghosh)?

Consciously adopting a contrapuntal methodological approach that draws together within a single frame two “Asian” life trajectories that have more often than not been kept apart, we consider how critical images and signature image-events have contributed to a complex interplay between the iconization and the demonization of these two men. Because both Gandhi and Mao effectively tried to represent the vast and “mute” peasantry of their respective national cultures, claiming to speak for and on behalf of them, we consider the play of their peasant-ness as their fatherly bodies are placed on offer in image displays for visual consumption. Our insistently comparative exercise, we expect, will yield insights about these two founding fathers—and the nationalisms they respectively embody—hitherto occluded in the vast scholarship that has centered on the one or the other.

In conjunction with our project, a number of workshops, one to be held at Stanford's Humanities Center (January 2015, *Spectacle and Sovereignty: Stately Bodies on Display*, <http://shc.stanford.edu/events/spectacle-sovereignty-stately-bodies-display>), a second at Heidelberg (July 2015, *Artful Bodies: Charisma and the Aesthetics of Power*), will consider the questions addressed in this project from a broader perspective by focussing on representations of political leaders/states(wo)men from many different cultures and ages.

These workshops will center around the formation of political iconography, the representations of political leaders and the making (and breaking) of global icons. We focus on the body with a view towards the following question: If nationalism is a “somatic” formation, what lessons do we learn from a juxtaposition of the radically divergent posthumous careers of the two fatherly bodies of Mao and Gandhi? Is the Mahatma's symbolic capital decreased because his body is no longer available for consumption and affirmation, as is Mao's? Or does Mao's ever-present body, as opposed to the Mahatma's vanished torso, in fact produce a greater risk for his

posthumous reputation, as iconoclastic pieces of contemporary art demonstrate? Our focus is insistently on the (male) body, driven as we are by the conviction that the corporeal is critical to the affective and ethical hold that these men (and others like them) have had over their constituencies and beyond, even while it made them vulnerable to caricature or ridicule as well.

Highlighting the national/regional and global image cultures that have developed around them, our series of workshops will underscore the connections between “imaged bodies,” “political iconographies” and “picture power”. Methodologically, we propose that looking at—rather than through—images can fundamentally alter the trajectory and the terms of historical description. Visual/literary culture used to be seen as a distraction from the serious business of history, but images (be they visual, literary or other) can in fact also be a locus of cultural and historical change. An image is never just an aid to understanding. Instead, it radically affects the character of that which it sets out to explain: it creates new experiences, new knowledge, and new identities. Our series of workshops therefore aims to determine the logic of images of global icons in the process of history making and of historical understanding.

Each of the workshops will involve Barbara Mittler and Sumathi Ramaswamy. In addition, a number of invited speakers and faculty and graduate students from the institutions involved are part of the setup. Envisaged as two-day-workshops open to the respective University publics. Each of the workshops will feature short presentations and long discussions of theoretical positions as well as concrete examples on representations of the *Global Icons* to be offered by the participants who will bring in materials from different fields such as, film, literature, art and the social media.

Workshop 1

## **Spectacle & Sovereignty: Stately Bodies on Display**

**Stanford Humanities Centre, January 23-24, 2015**

This workshop focuses on the politics, aesthetics, and ethics of masculinity/femininity in the making of iconic wo/men who have become globally recognizable (some of them under the sign of “father/mother of the nation”). The modern era has produced all manner of male protagonists who at various times have served as the progenitors of the polities in whose very names they subsequently act and speak. Even as we ask why the “mother of the nation” is typically an abstraction while founding fathers are flesh-and-blood men, we are interested in considering how these flesh-and-blood men have been transformed into hyper- visible symbols forms that come to dominate public spaces and places. We are particularly interested in tracking the role of literary/visual imagery and media events in the production of such fatherly/motherly bodies which, following the work of Bishnupriya Ghosh, we characterize as “bio-icons.” We also ask what is at stake in placing the fatherly body under scrutiny in the wake of the feminist, post-structuralist, and post-colonialist turns in social scientific and historical scholarship.

The workshop thus seeks to bring to the fore the performative dimensions of sovereignty—widely conceived to range from notions of autonomy to exercise of authority—as these become visible in the calculated displays of political and stately bodies. We are particularly interested in understanding how image and media cultures work to turn flesh-and-blood bodies into spectacles in public and performative contexts, and are especially sensitive to the gendered dimensions of such spectacular performances. Not least, we wish to understand what such “sovereign” performances tell us about the national body politic that such icons enliven with their public displays.

Invited speakers: Chen Xiaomei (UC San Diego), Bishnupriya Ghosh (Santa Barbara), Haiyan Lee (Stanford), Günter Leypoldt (Heidelberg), Thomas Maissen (Heidelberg/DHI Paris), Grant Parker (Stanford), and Sharikha Thiranagama (Stanford), Ban Wang (Stanford).

Workshop 2

## **Artful Bodies: Charisma and the Aesthetics of Power**

**Heidelberg, July 17-18, 2015**

Is it artful representation that transforms flesh and blood men such as Mao or Gandhi into charismatic presences? This is the principal question we ask in this workshop, as we acknowledge that such representations can take many forms. A leader's "image" consists of his political program and the values this embodies; of his political deeds and merits; of the associates he surrounds himself with; of his reception and reputation; and of the coding inscribed into his public appearance including his body language, clothing, hairdo, beard and *mien* as they might appear in paintings, photographs, as they might be lampooned in cartoons or as they might be idealized in musical, literary, philosophical, political, elite and popular "texts." Political iconography is a well-established field, but its material and argumentative base remains largely restricted to specific regions or cultures. The question of how particular leaders' representations or "images" may have travelled globally is what we seek to address in the context of this workshop. We hope that our contributors will study the particular iconographic traits of charismatic leadership and that they will explore the circulation of such imagery over time and across space. We also hope that participants in the workshop will also consider the complex interplay between idolization and demonization that contribute to the development of such charismatic iconography. Not least, we are interested in bringing to the fore "the art," literally, of power, especially the exercise of masculine power in the context of complex political and stately performances.

Invited speakers: Horst Bredekamp (Berlin), Iftikhar Dadi (Cornell), Jeremy Taylor (Nottingham), Boris Groys (NYU), Monica Juneja (Heidelberg), and Martin Warnke (Hamburg).