

CONCEPTUAL JOURNEYS – Conference Report to the Workshop

Representations of Sexualities in Asian and European Cultures (June 8-9, 2009)

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On June 8th and 9th 2009, the “Internationales Wissenschaftsforum Heidelberg” (IWH) was the meeting point of illustrious scholars from around the world in the context of a unique workshop, entitled “Representations of Sexualities in Asian and European Cultures.” The second of a workshop series and part of a larger project aiming at “rethinking gender, sexuality and the body in a transcultural art world,” the “Representations of Sexuality” workshop was the fruit of an interdisciplinary research cluster at the University of Heidelberg, “Asia and Europe in a Global Context: Shifting Asymmetries in Cultural Flows.” The convenors of this expansive project, Professors Melanie Trede (project coordinator), Christiane Brosius, Gita Dharampal-Frick, Susanne Enderwitz, Barbara Mittler, Inken Prohl and Ph.D. student Lucia Banholzer (project manager), envisioned this workshop series as a means to challenge the clichéd representations of the ‘Oriental body’ in Western scholarship and, through scholarly expertise in the areas under discussion, to pioneer alternative approaches to sexualities, gender relations and contemporary artistic practices.

As Professor Barbara MITTLER (University of Heidelberg) stated in her welcome address, the key-concept of this second Heidelberg workshop on representations of sexuality was that of *asymmetrical flows*, which refers both to the fluid circulation of concepts between Asian and European cultures and to the “asymmetries in the perception, representation and public discourse relating to the shaping and fashioning of bodies.” Only by envisioning and investigating these dynamics of cross-cultural processes, dynamics which do not pertain solely to a 21st century framework but enjoy a long history, can one hope to achieve a much needed restructuring of disciplinary borders.

In her introduction to the workshop however, Professor Doris CROISSANT (University of Heidelberg) warned against the potential problems that further complicate the discussion of cross-culturality and cross-cultural flows, namely the semiotic war between the symbols of sexuality and their meaning around the world and the limitations of dealing with sexuality when ignoring that literary and visual media do not simply mirror existing relations, but also create new ones.

The theoretical framework of the workshop was further expanded by Joshua MOSTOW (University of British Columbia) in his keynote address entitled “National Erotics, Gender, and the Representation of Sexuality in Heian Japan.” From a strictly biological sense to its usage in the works of clinical sexology and Freudian psychoanalysis, (Western) “sexuality” has come a long way before reaching the complex form of the Foucauldian discourse, a discourse that Mostow examined critically to find it blatantly oblivious to issues such as colonialism and imperialism and intrinsically orientalist. Its orientalism, best observed in the complementary dyad *ars erotica – scientia sexualis*, presupposes the

existence of a monolithic Oriental Other, China, Japan, the Arab cultures, the locus of an *ars erotica orientalis*.

In the process of dismantling some of Foucault's assertions, Mostow briefly reexamined the ancient Chinese approaches to sex as they were known from a 10th century Japanese compendium of Chinese sources. His strategy, however, was to gradually bring his audience closer to the historical era that constituted the focal point of his address: Heian Japan (795- 1185 CE). In an era in which aristocratic women had an active role in the production of literature, Mostow detected in their writing an opposition to the classical Chinese discourse on sexuality and it is precisely this opposition, between restraint of representation and explicitness, that defines Japanese "national erotics."

The same discourse of sexual restraint characteristic of Heian vernacular culture did not, however, erase the possibilities of representing sexuality and Mostow came with solid textual evidence, from the 13th century *Kokon chōmonjū*, to prove that pornographic images did circulate at least in the late Heian period (12th century). Explicit pornography also seems to have coexisted with other erotic Japanese paintings and the fact that they both can be termed as *osokudzu-we* ("lying-down pictures") blurs the distinctions between the erotic potential of oversized genitalia and that of a male-female aristocratic couple lounging together. Mostow's thesis was: if male and female are rarely portrayed together in *yamato-e* (Japanese-style painting), then, when they are, one must recognize the erotic potential and purpose of such an illustration. In other words, eroticism in Heian culture, does not, must not, always equate explicitness, and "lying-down pictures" drew their erotic potential not from overt depictions of anatomic details, but from subtle opportunities for vicarious experience, of the arousal, of the thrill, of the anxiety of the figures illustrated.

At the end of Mostow's presentation and of June 8th, the audience was left with an eagerness to know more, to explore farther and further, to continue this *voyage autour de la chambre et du monde*. June 9th, the day of the workshop proper, provided this very opportunity.

On the morning of the day in question, Professor Natalie BOYMEL KAMPEN (Barnard College) officially opened the proceedings of the workshop with the fascinating story of the *cucullati*, "little people in hooded cloaks," as she endearingly called them, in fact, enigmatic figurines found all across the Roman Empire and dating between the first and the third centuries of the Common Era.

The title of her presentation, "Boys in the Hood: The *Cucullati* of Roman Britain" confined the focus of her research to the second and third-century hooded figurines unearthed in Gloucestershire in the west of Britain. Kampen then turned to these humble and long-ignored objects not in order to debate, as some other scholars have done previously, their role in the history of an ancient religion which presupposes notions of homogenous Celiticity and Romanitas, but to determine, through the use of gender and sexuality, more about the nature and the role of the *cucullati* and about the processes of cultural interaction which led to their production. She further hypothesized that the use of the *cucullus*, the hooded cloak, as well as the gender neutrality of these figures, facilitate the representation of a "ritual collectivity" in which everyone and anyone can participate and which contributed to a necessary homogenization of the various populations in the Roman Empire.

From third century Roman Britain, the audience was suddenly transported, by Professor Afsaneh NAJMABADI (Harvard University) and her presentation on "The Genus of Sex or the Sexing of *jins*," to

nineteenth- and twentieth-century Iran, an Iran in which Najmabadi tried to identify, in a Foucauldian theoretical framework, the emergence of “something called sex.” She proceeded to investigate the word *jins*, the modern Persian term for “sex,” which evolved to this particular meaning from a more general usage as “categorization.”

The first step in Najmabadi’s analysis was to identify and closely examine the various domains in which *jins* activates as “sex” in contemporary Persian as well as its various syntactical forms. She then retraced the meanings attached to *jins* back to the nineteenth and pre-nineteenth centuries in search of the concepts that might have preceded and facilitated the association *jins*-sex.

The point of confluence between the two periods of *jins* usage is in the late nineteenth-century body of modernist literature centered on marriage. The use of *jins* in such texts, Najmabadi argued, established two connections: between sex and reproduction and between sex and gender, both of which influence the contemporary meanings attached to *jins*.

Finally, in the early decades of the twentieth century, *jins*-sex came into existence in a series of works on marital manners and sexual education, especially translations from Euro-American sources. Such works appeared, Najmabadi maintained, as symptomatic of the modernists’ failure in their assumption of natural heterosexuality that would emerge after the elimination of traditional gender segregation.

Professor Sanjay SRIVASTAVA (Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi) relocated everyone to new geo-temporal coordinates, from modern Iran to postmodern India. The topic of his presentation, “Neighborhood, City, Gated Community: On the Sexual Cultures of Indian ‘Pornography,’” was constituted by two types of pornographic materials and the spaces they traverse.

The first category, the “footpath pornography,” consists of cheap, poorly illustrated booklets of low-quality paper, which enjoys primarily male authorship and audiences. The most interesting aspect of this footpath pornography is, however, that its clientele is mainly made up of migrants from rural area to large urban centers and to them, footpath pornography provides a form of education on modernity and sexuality. Other materials, sold alongside these so-called pornographic booklets, are generally published by “sex clinics,” “institutions” which employ pseudo-scientific methods and approaches and which are intricately linked to the phenomenon of migration.

In the second category of pornographic materials, there are internet pornographic sites of the Savita Bhabhi type. “Savita sister-in-law” series is an illustrated comic available exclusively on internet, the heroine of which is a sexually voracious, yet very traditional, Indian woman.

Both categories of pornographic materials contribute to the creation of spaces of production of modern consumption, spaces in which consumerism and traditionalism can merge, but whereas the former addresses the sexual issues of a migrant class, the latter refers mostly to an Indian middle class. As for the spaces associated with the two categories (pornographic and social), the sex clinic and the DLF city (the gated community), are both markers of a new transnational politics of location which links to new specific spaces appearing in the cities.

The first three presentations of the workshop, of Professors Kampen, Najmabadi and Srivastava, were further debated during an ample interim discussion. From issues of transcultural representations of sexuality, to female homosexuality, from concepts of male and female visual beauty to cross-dressing

and androgyny, the quantum of sexual manifestations in ancient Rome, classical Japan, modern Iran and contemporary India was minutely examined, analyzed and interpreted by both the professors and the students attending the workshop.

The afternoon session however was entirely focused on the “Extreme Orient,” namely China and Japan. Professor Paola ZAMPERINI (Amherst College) brought up a complex topic in her presentation entitled “A Family Romance (Incest and Filial Piety) in Zhang Ailing’s *Xinjing*.” Initially, Zamperini confessed, she has chosen Zhang Ailing’s *Heart Sutra*, a novella published in 1943, as the locus of representation of family dynamics and sexuality in connection to the topic of Chinese filial piety. In the course of her research, she changed her perspective and came to examine transgressive sexuality in the form of the incestuous desires that connect the novella’s heroine, Xiaohan, and her father, Xu Fengyi.

This short, yet dense work of Chinese modern fiction is to Zamperini not only a perfect example of refashioning the classical Chinese repertoire of incest stories, but also a reshaping of concepts such as filial piety, sexuality and desire at a point of confluence between Western and indigenous ideas of modernity. Read merely as a case of direct Freudian influence, Zamperini argued, Zhang Ailing’s story might not be able to reveal its entire complexity. For that very reason, she chooses to examine it in the larger context of incest in Chinese literature while keeping an eye on the ways in which, through incest, it helps develop a brand-new family dynamics.

In order to do so, Zamperini brought into focus issues such as the connection between incest in the story and filial piety, between the novella’s title and Buddhist ideology and between the characters and the recurrent motif of ghost haunting. The ultimate purpose was not to simply identify the traces of the past in Zhang Ailing’s characters, nor to classify those characters as exclusively modern, but to reveal how incest reshapes family relationships to the point where it unravels the very fabric of the Chinese traditional family.

The final presentation of the workshop transported the audience back to the geographical starting point of the event, Japan, revealing the organizers’ uncompromising attempt to offer a complete learning experience. Professor Timon SCREECH (SOAS, London) was entrusted with the mission of closing what had been a unique conceptual journey around the world, a journey which crossed not only the borders of time and space, but also of disciplines, a journey through words and images, through texts, paintings and statues.

Screech’s presentation represents his own attempt to achieve completion, ten years after the publication of *Sex and the Floating World*, ten years after much heated debate generated by his book. “Re-engaging with Shunga” was the new chapter that Screech has prepared in view of the republication of his book this year and as such it provides both an answer to previous criticism and an addition to his research on *shunga*.

As unflinching as ever, Screech persisted in his attempt to reconcile art historians with the history of sexuality through his claim that Japanese Edo Period erotica (1600-1868 CE) is overridingly masturbatory, meant to deal with a lingering sexual frustration among its consumers. Out of all his ideas in *Sex and the Floating World*, the masturbation theory was probably the most controversial to an entire community of art critics and thus, once more, Screech felt the need to reassert and support it with additional evidence, while at the same time arguing against some of the theories brought up to

demolish it, such as the claims that *shunga* was used as educational materials in bridal trousseaux, as advertising media for prostitution, as a boost-up for jaded sexual appetites and so on.

One by one, he took up and discussed important issues in *shunga*: the depictions of heterosexual couples, desirable in sexual imagery precisely because romantic matchmaking was fairly absent from real life, the depiction of children in sexual contexts, translating a desire for the innocent in a world oversaturated with prostitution, intermingling of homosexual and heterosexual coupling, indicating that both share a similar potential for arousal.

As expected, Screech's presentation was bound to incite questions and comments. Thus, June 9th ended with a storm, but not the one brought about by the heavy clouds outside. It was a storm of ideas, of questions, of theories, of inquiries.

Conference Overview

Monday, June 8, 18:15 Keynote

Joshua Mostow, University of British Columbia, Vancouver
"National Erotics, Gender, and the Representation of Sexuality in Heian Japan"

20:00 *Dinner*

Tuesday, June 9, Workshop

9:15 **Welcome address**, Barbara Mittler, Institute of Chinese Studies
Introduction, Doris Croissant, Institute of East Asian Art History

9:30-10:00 **Natalie Boymel Kampen**, Barnard College, New York
"Cucullati: Boys in the Hood"

10:00-10:40 Discussion

10:40-11:10 **Afsaneh Najmabadi**, Harvard University, Boston
"Genus of Sex or The Sexing of *jins*"

11:10-11:50 Discussion

11:50 Interim discussion

12:30 *Lunch*

14:00-14:30 **Sanjay Srivastava**, Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi
"Neighbourhood, City, Gated Community: On the Sexual Cultures of Indian 'Pornography'"

14:30-15:10 Discussion

15:10-15:40 **Paola Zamperini**, Amherst College, Amherst, MA
"A Family Romance. Incest and Filial Piety in Zhang Ailing's *Xinjing*"

15:40-16:20 Discussion

16:20 *Coffee Break*

16:40-17:10 **Timon Screech**, SOAS, London
"Re-engaging with *Shunga* (erotica)"

17:10-17:50 Discussion

17:50 Final Discussion

19:00 *Dinner*