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Internationalizing porn studies

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Internationalizing porn studies

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Porn studies are currently dominated by European and American scholarly networks. This article looks at how the field might broaden its scope to include non-western media and cultural contexts. Using an example of porn research in Japan and China, it is argued that non-western pornographies are not just a set of global and regional cultures to be mapped and studied, but are a tool for interrogating broader questions of technological innovation, internet politics, sexuality rights and obscenity legislation. Porn studies can and should deal with these larger cultural–political debates and social movements in addition to documenting different aesthetics of sexually explicit media.

Keywords: porn studies; globalization; Asian porn studies; post-pornography

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Now that porn studies has emerged as an international academic field of study with a dedicated journal, researchers from many different cultures will be able to shape and influence the field. Currently, the field is dominated by European and American scholarly networks, while elsewhere in many parts of the world pornography researchers are not in a position that allows for an uncomplicated endorsement by their universities. Rather than seeing international porn studies as a western mission to be taken into new territories, it would be more appropriate to set up transnational networks that are able to deal with cultural differences. Porn studies should be a meaningful encounter with divergent legal, moral and religious parameters, sexual tastes and bodily ideals, as well as the particular inter-racial and political tensions that go beyond Euro-American controversies around pornography. In this sense, pornographies are not just a set of global and regional cultures to be mapped and studied, but are a tool for interrogating broader questions of technological innovation, internet politics, sexuality rights and obscenity legislation, media governance and censorship. Porn studies can and should deal with these larger cultural–political debates and questions of activism, as well as documenting the regional frameworks and aesthetics of sexually explicit media.

In the USA and Europe we have witnessed a counter-cultural 'post-pornography' movement that has promoted critical research and a special interest in non-corporate, artistic and subcultural sexually explicit media. Besides being critical of corporate global media, post-pornography pays special attention to gender diversity and queer pornographies, as well as questions of racial stereotyping. Tim Stuttgen,

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who was an advocate of this movement, writes that 'post-pornography lays claim to a critical, revolutionary potential within the regime of sexual representation through performative excessiveness' (2010, 10). He explains that media conglomerates and porn/sex workers alike have histories of self-reflection and emancipation, as exemplified in the career trajectory of Annie Sprinkle: 'Sprinkle abandoned the role of the victim in order to develop sexual and artistic practices that no longer naturalize, but instead comment, reflect and parody' (2010, 11).

The post-pornography wave coincided with the beginnings of the Berlin Porn Film festival, which showcased many examples of sexual and artistic practices that commented on or parodied sex, bodies and pornographic acts. These aspects of bodily awareness and reflection in sexually explicit media have appealed to Euro-American porn studies and have also been noted by scholars of internet pornography. For example, as Michael Goddard (2007) notes, big beautiful women (BBW) pornography is a type of culture that questions the typical corporate products of global sex entertainment, which to a great extent have relied on homogenized imagery of the well-toned, youthful and overly epilated sexy girl. BBW pornography responds to a need for new forms of bodily expressivity, and for reclaiming intimacy through social media and pornography. It thrives precisely because it has allowed people to feel sexualized and bonded through a belief in pornographic counter-mythologies. BBW pornography typifies the non-normative potential of pornography as it crosses the boundaries between commercial and amateur media, movie-making and hook-up platforms, while accommodating people from different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. Goddard explains that BBW pornography does not promote a fixed and commodified fetishistic identity, but a type of open-ended sensibility developed through the performance of diverging female and male roles. In his view, BBW pornography has become not only an internet curiosity but also a site of bodily transformation that potentially influences a wider sphere of innovative sex cultures (2007, 188).

If we look at this development from an international perspective, we can see that it has not managed to cross the border into Asian territories. In Hong Kong as well as greater China and Asia, where I have been located and conducting porn studies since 2005, there is indeed a dire need for this kind of scholarship. There has not been any research on how global porn cultures have matched or resisted Euro-American trends towards post-pornography. When I conducted my research on pornography audiences in Hong Kong and China, it was clear that young adults are aware of porn industries and happy to join in debates, but they do not easily endorse western ideologies or bodily aesthetics. The porn markets in Asia are more or less taken over by Japanese porn industries and sexual fashions, while porn studies as a field is currently more focused on Euro-American cultures and research paradigms of sex and media. This is not a situation that can be easily changed as it is hard to gain funding from Asian governments or foundations for researching pornography. But it would be fascinating to study Japanese pornography as a global media formation with great impact on sexual tastes and gender politics in (South) East Asia. There are smaller and often illegal and independent local porn industries in countries such as China, Thailand, and Indonesia, but generally local consumers are witnessing a deluge of Japanese products, with mostly 'male-stream' plots, edgy taboo-breaking genres and unimaginable fetishes (even for the West), alongside the historically embedded drawings and animation trends. One of the primary goals of

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international porn research could be to archive histories of local erotic and pornographic media and the overall adoption of and/or resistance towards Japanese pornography.

In Japan, there has been very little in the way of porn studies, let alone a post-pornographic perspective on the creative industries. It is almost as if an ongoing Japanese porn expansion is predicated on the fact that pornography needs to be consumed and enjoyed by multiple groups and cultures, but not analyzed, decoded or criticized for the purposes of education or scholarship. Japanese pornography does not have a founding mother who has 'pornified' and questioned her own gender emancipation. This might perhaps explain the new wave of educational videos that feature male directors who work with female models to painstakingly demonstrate physiological aspects of sex and arousal. For instance, one such video takes the form of a lecture on female arousal by a famous director who pleasures a woman by stimulating her 'portio vaginalis cervicis' (sometimes called 'portio,' or the inner part of a woman's uterus). As Wong and Yau (n.d.) have documented, the director, who appears as a sexologist, wearing a white coat and mask, sends the female actress into sexual ecstasy. He explains to the male audience how to pleasure their women in this way through a new sexual technique of stimulating the uterus, and most importantly through a sadistic-cum-sexist ideology called *kotoba-zeme* – literally speech-scolding, or a verbal attack.

While this type of pornographic lecture has the potential to denaturalize and reflect on the construction of female arousal, in fact it does the opposite. It presents female arousal as needing to be stimulated by male sadism and verbal abuse, which reinforces a return to problematic gender politics from a western point of view. The trope of self-reflection or playful analysis is entirely controlled by the male director, who is the only other actor in the video and who does not leave any space for interruption or discussion. This new genre hijacks the potential of porn studies as critical and multi-dimensional media analysis.

In mainland China, where all pornography has been banned since 1949, the netporn industries and VCD markets are dominated by Japanese products and genres. It is almost unthinkable for Chinese citizens to imagine a Chinese type of pornography or a sexually subversive porn culture. One of the major figures who fought alongside Chinese netizens against internet censorship was the Japanese porn star, Sola Aoi. She is stereotypically young and beautiful but also has cyber-cultural finesse. She became known for 'having brought down China's Great Firewall' when she became a fervent micro-blogger on Twitter in 2010, motivating thousands of Chinese fans to access her banned website (Ottomo 2010). Besides this isolated case of feminine pornographic liberation, there have been remarkable do-it-yourself collections made by adventurous youths and gay men that demand our attention. But again, these collections are fragile and easily demolished by censors, while any type of research is currently discouraged and even prone to legal persecution. China is generally undergoing a new epoch of sexual emancipation and social justice through erotic entertainment coinciding with a push towards neo-liberalism, and this results in regular crackdowns on the leaders of sex activism, such as the radical sex workers' activist Ye Haiyan who is an ardent and pro-active feminist, often harassed by the authorities (Jacobs 2011, 46–51).

Since 2009 Chinese netizens have been pro-active in defending their 'right to pornography' against ongoing rounds of government crackdown. A movement of

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Grass-Mud Horse (*cao-ni-ma*) activists was started to playfully criticize and then overturn the government policy to have all computers sold in the People's Republic of China installed with Greendam Youth Escort filtering software. The figure of the Grass-Mud Horse became an internet meme and was widely used as a defiant symbol that challenged widespread internet censorship. Ten mythical animals were created on the interactive encyclopedia *Baidu Baike* and people started using them as a mode of humorous, vulgar protest. Amongst the other animals were the 'French-Croatian Squid,' the 'Small Elegant Butterfly' and the 'Chrysanthemum Silkworms.' All of these Chinese names can also vaguely refer to Chinese profanities, as they utilize homophones and characters whose meaning changes when a different tone is applied.

The Grass-Mud Horse is supposedly a species of alpaca. The name is derived from *cao ni ma*, whose near-equivalent word translates as 'fuck your mother.' The greatest enemy of the Grass-Mud Horse is the 'river crab' whose name resembles *hexie*, meaning 'harmony,' referring to government censors who wish to create a 'harmonious society' (*hexie shehui*). The Grass-Mud Horse spurred people's imagination, as evidenced in the thousands of image-collages and mockumentaries that have appeared online. The fad spread like a benign virus and was later popularized as a stuffed animal, an activist icon-turned commodity. The popular theme song of the Grass-Mud Horse was banned by The State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television in March 2009 together with the official blocking of the entire meme itself.

Similarly, young women in mainland China are heavily invested in new types of erotica and sex activism such as fan-produced images and slash fiction based on Japanese boy's love animations (*yaoi*). These online fictions and images detail love stories between two men and include unbridled pornographic scenes, veering towards taboo forms of sexuality such as incest and sado-masochism. While boy's love fans in China do not align themselves with queer or outspoken feminist activists, they do hold extensive discussions about their sexual tastes and their legal rights. Erika Junhui Yi, a boys' love fan and a scholar of the genre, provides an insider's view of the crackdown on *yaoi* websites and fan forums that, underpinned by homophobic arguments, occurred in 2010, with well-known newspaper columnists and bloggers such as Dou Wentao denouncing the subculture. In 2011 the Zenzhou police arrested 32 slash fiction writers, and this news was widely commented on through statements and cartoons on the social media site Weibo (Yi 2013). Many of these commentaries suggested that the subculture would be vast and robust enough to be able to resist censorship. One of the major websites in China for boy's love fiction, called Jinjiang, boasts five million registered users and over 300,000 registered writers (Xu and Yang 2013). In this sense, the fandom groups can no longer be seen as marginalized cultures, but as booming erotica waves that are in dialogue with the sexual values and regulations of mainstream society.

As demonstrated above, it is sometimes the case that major innovative porn and erotica cultures and ensuing social movements are driven by non-western countries. It is an important goal to involve scholars globally in pornography scholarship because these phenomena are culturally significant in many 'under-researched' parts of the world and could lead to truly innovative ways of studying cultural globalization. For instance, in mainland China, which has already attracted a vast number of humanities initiatives in recent years, the study of sex entertainment could

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be framed as a critical examination of the country's stance towards 'benign consumerism.' The Chinese Communist Party aspires to control any activism and research around sex entertainment by promoting a specific type of netizen activity through commodity fetishism and/or consumerism. As Lisa Rofel (2007) has shown in her book *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*, sexuality has become part of the ongoing negotiations about what it means to be a Chinese cosmopolitan citizen and a benign consumer. Unlike the older generations, who were taught to accept political hardship, poverty and the abstinence of the Mao years, the younger generations are encouraged to free themselves from these constraints. Their experimentation with sexually explicit media is encouraged if it is used towards the development of a Chinese cosmopolitanism and lifestyles that are proudly and excessively materialistic and that involve a soothing or quenching of 'the dangerous passions of politics.' Sex entertainment is encouraged as a fashion for transcending restrictive local lifestyles but ultimately aims at a kind of patriotism or for a social reconfiguration of China's place in the world (Rofel 2007, 121). But since most sexually explicit media in China are imported from non-Chinese producers, porn and erotica provide a crack within the system of nation-state control, perhaps an escape from bombastic 'Chinese' values or a dissociation between national services and sexual identity.

In trying to promote a transnational perspective on Chinese sex entertainment, I have in recent years set up a series of trans-Asian workshops entitled 'Drifting Eyeballs: A Workshop About Feminine Pornographic Tastes and Experiences.' This project was intended to collect female testimonies about sexually explicit media as a type of cross-cultural engagement with new media and emerging sexual sensibilities. Since this was a project about women's uses of social media and the sexual gaze, I started out by gathering small groups of women in Hong Kong, Japan, and the USA to discuss a variety of pornographic tastes. I solicited women's testimonies by means of workshops that consisted of screenings of short video clips followed by discussion. All of the participants had undergone their own unique developments in media literacy alongside emerging and ingrained cultural fashions and taboos and their circulation within digital media environments.

Women in the workshops were asked to watch and respond to a set of culturally diverse video clips; from hard-core pornography to alternative queer and female-friendly pornography produced within different cultures. In this way the workshops simulated a social media environment where netizens browse through sexually explicit media that feature different genres, fads, and products. Traveling from Hong Kong to the west coast of the USA, the project archived a wide range of individual and localized reactions to the public screenings. Finding hosts and public spaces for the screenings was complex, but I managed to set them up in several universities, in sex shops and art galleries, and in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans* community spaces. At times the project had to leave behind the notion of 'educational institution' altogether, as we gathered in private spaces or motel rooms to watch and discuss the segments on a laptop computer. In some senses, the use of smaller screens and tablet devices instead of projections on a large screen worked well for people who felt more comfortable, relaxed, and able to take distance from the oftentimes 'crude' and 'in-your-face' imagery.

The project became focused on finding ways to encourage these publicly shared expressions of arousal and affect within different cultural environments, and to have

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dialogues with a digital generation who are more acquainted with online porn sharing and sexual commentary. The workshops were fruitful in that women overall did not feel subjugated by these media landscapes. They were quite willing to share information about porn usage and decode the media selections analytically and emotionally. There were clear cultural differences in how this was enacted. American women easily endorsed a shift from commercial to 'post-pornographic' aesthetics, concomitant with the rise in social media and a self-expressivity that allows individuals and alternative communities to criticize corporate streamlining and reclaim queer body types as the object of fantasy. But this ideal of pornographic emancipation was not endorsed by women in Hong Kong and Japan who did not see pornography as a means to liberate their bodies or to inform aspects of sexual or gender politics. Instead, they wanted to liberate pornography from any such humanitarian or political-activist mission and to embody a perfect female fantasy, even though that fantasy was nowhere to be found in our selections. There was a wide gap between western and Asian tastes, and the question remained whether pornography would be able to reflect on larger or 'more serious' political or gender issues. The workshops showed that researching porn experiences can be part of the creation of a novel public sphere, as well as indicating that we have tickled (not yet scratched) the surface of what could be a much wider range of cultural perspectives on porn studies.

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