

### Asian Postmodernities and their Legacies

**Veranstalter:** University Research Priority Program (URPP) Asia and Europe; Institute of East Asian Studies of the University of Zurich  
**Datum, Ort:** 30.03.2012-31.03.2012,

**Bericht von:** Justyna Jagusik, University Research Priority Program URPP Asia and Europe, University of Zurich

The international Graduate Student Workshop „Asian Postmodernities and their Legacies“ took place at the University of Zurich on the 30th and 31st of March 2012. It was jointly organised by the University Research Priority Program (URPP) Asia and Europe and the Institute of East Asian Studies of the University of Zurich.<sup>1</sup> The workshop highlighted new perspectives of contemporary East Asian and South Asian societies, derived from cultural, postcolonial and gender studies. It aimed at enhancing exchange and networking opportunities between young scholars in a manner that engaged with their immediate cultural environments in the postmodern context. Presentations and discussions during the event unanimously stressed the criticality of implemented theories and research methods.

The participants of the workshop engaged in a „contrapuntal“<sup>2</sup> reading of postmodernity as a discourse that challenges modernity's exclusive mode of thinking. Concurrently they reflected critically on the ongoing academic canonisation processes of the notion of postmodernity, which have been established as a separate doxa. The complexities of postmodern phenomena were thematised through their three basic relations to modernity: that of temporality (being after), causality (because of) and transgression (reaching beyond). These aspects were explored in relation to their ambiguous (dis)continuity with the modern. This relationship may be described as a concomitant critique of, and complicity with, modernist aesthetics. In their papers, presenters also examined the validity of four crucial features of the postmodern condition: globalisation and diasporic modes of existence, the re-writing of modern grand narratives of progress and development, the process of dealing with unstable and multiplied subject positions and the growing impact of the digital

universe on all spheres of social life.

In her opening lecture, the academic director of the URPP Asia and Europe ANDREA RIEMENSCHNITTER (Zurich) revisited both the major targets philosophical postmodernism had addressed and the objections it was subjected to. She then offered an overview of Lyotard's defense of the postmodern aesthetic, which among other points for this philosopher implied the redeeming of the much vilified inhuman, childlike other vis-à-vis the humanist rush on adult rationality and epistemic control. In his view, the modernist obsession with (scientific, aesthetic, biopolitical etc.) systems and technologies forecloses „the unharmonizable“, the „other of acceleration and abbreviation“, intimately linked by him to the childhood state of an inhuman, promising freedom from institutionalized values and knowledges.<sup>3</sup>

The first session, entitled „Mnemotopes & Post-Scapes,“ focused on „the presence of the past“<sup>4</sup> as a feature of the postmodern condition. YUZHOU XING (Nanjing) introduced his field research in the former socialist model village of Dazhai in the People's Republic of China. His investigation of a restaged socialist past in the era of mass tourism explored the alteration of the village landscape by a market-oriented reproduction of the Dazhai-experience. XIUFENG ZHANG (Darmstadt), in his presentation of Shanghai as a re-globalising metropolis attempted to come to terms with the discourses and technologies involved in the production of a specific landscape. The following discussion focused on the changing meanings of urban and rural space. Credit was given to both papers for their contributions to a crucial debate within the postmodern, namely that relating to the different politics of authenticity and artificiality.

---

<sup>1</sup> The workshop was organized with the generous support from the Universities of Zurich Graduate Student Campus Grant, URPP Asia and Europe, Zürcher Hochschulestiftung, and from the University of Zurich.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Lyotard Jean-François, *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, London 1992.

<sup>4</sup> That was the title of the 1980 1st International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, which is understood as a threshold for the emergence of postmodern architecture.

The second session, entitled „Gender & Bodies“ was divided into two blocks, the first of which was dedicated to investigations within literary studies, whereas the second combined gender studies with approaches originating from the social sciences. Most theories of the postmodern concede that its outlook involves a changing relationship between our bodies and our worlds. Moreover, postmodernism is marked by the awakening of a subject who is no longer exclusively modelled upon the Western white male. SOURAV KARGUPTA (Calcutta) applied the Derridean notion of writing/*écriture* as a critical category in his multifaceted analysis of the uneasiness between third world feminism and postmodernism. He inquired into the opportunities available to feminine writing in a postmodern setting, with its recognition of radical instability and critique of essentialist attributions. JUSTYNA JAGUSCIK (Zurich, Warsaw) in her analysis of the Chinese body writing phenomenon questioned the subversive potential for literary images of feminine body experience in the era of global hyper-visibility and commodification of feminine representations. She argued in favour of the emancipative value of a group of young Chinese female authors, who transcend their conventional commercial positioning on the transnational publishing market. FUSAKO INNAMI (Oxford) concluded the literary component of the session with her investigation into the haptic body through the literary creations of Japanese contemporary female writer, Matsuura Rieko. Making the concept of the haptic developed by Deleuze and Guattari her departure point she delineated the literary deconstruction of the notion of stability and passive female subjectivity. Innami's critique targeted the gender-oriented discourse of passivity in the contemporary Japanese cultural context.

In their discourse on gender related issues within the social sciences, the three following participants touched upon topics related to the ongoing renegotiation of traditional and modern gender orders. LARA MOMESSO (London) opened the second block with a discussion of the empirical data on cross-strait marriage migrants that she had collected during her fieldwork in Taiwan. She showed the existence of complex transnational and

gendered subjectivities, which have emerged through processes of oppression, negotiation, and resistance to conventionally available patterns of opportunities. Similarly, XIAOMIN DENG (Hong Kong) revealed, in her presentation on the straight wives of Chinese gay men, that the „stable“ gender order is in fact constantly under siege. She discussed data acquired while interviewing women using the discursive space of an Internet chat room for a dialogue on their hitherto unnoticed victimisation. The following discussion addressed the ways in which these women position themselves within the normative heterosexual matrix and within the oppressive patriarchal kinship structure. DIAN MAYA SAFITRI (Leiden) described the first institutionalised queer Muslim community in Indonesia and explained how transvestites negotiate their access to citizenship within the emerging public sphere. Furthermore, she delivered thought-provoking insights into both the mechanisms inherent to indigenous cosmologies and traditional religious ideas that are proving capable of instituting alternative subject positions. This closing paper highlighted anew a point of interest shared by all contributors to this particular session, that is the enormous importance of the ways in which subjects stage their positions (or subjectivities are staged) vis-à-vis various institutions within a matrix of complex power relationships.

The third session, „History & Transnational Dynamics,“ focused on postmodern acts of re-writing the past as part of a critical rethinking of modernity and thus shared some common themes with the first session. RUDOLPH NG (Heidelberg) analysed contemporary Chinese discourse on the historical coolie trade, in both academic and popular media. He criticised the current master narrative of the coolie trade in Chinese historiography as simplistic and based on a chauvinistic Chinese-versus-foreigner exploitation debate. Consequently Ng denied the existence of a postmodern approach to historiography in Mainland China, the crucial feature of which is an interest in minor narratives of subalternised peasants, women, the colonised and the defeated. THOMAS QUARTERMAIN's (Oxford) exploration of Korean identity enabled him to express his doubts in regard to Korea's future-

oriented self-fashioning as a multi-cultural state and argue for a different notion of multi-ethnicity. Within the context of various identity discourses, belonging to the set of post-modern inquiries, he considers this concept to be emerging from the theoretical preoccupation with transnational labour migration. Simultaneously though he perceives this to be resulting in a set of practices and tactics as used by nation-states to stage themselves in a postmodern and postcolonial era. JIANG JIE (Lyon), with his study of Shanghai's architecture contributed to another prominent theme of the workshop, that of Shanghai as an outstanding postmodern spatial configuration in contemporary Asia. WANG GANG's (Berkeley) inquiry into the paradoxical stability of the Chinese political regime closed the session. He introduced a novel methodological approach combining advanced mathematics with comparative political economy, which he introduced as a useful tool for predicting and explaining future political risks.

Although postmodernism has frequently been accused of ahistoricity, the papers presented during this workshop, especially in the third session, showed rather that postmodern approaches are obsessed with history. The papers touched on a variety of tendencies that have become pervasive since the humanistic postmodern turn, such as the rethinking of face-value historiography and the questioning of the epistemological value of the historian's enterprise, which have resulted in a continual blurring of the boundaries between history and fiction. The papers highlighted the perspective that parody and irony have become central rhetorical tools in the postmodern revisiting of the past.

The last session „Cultural Studies & Literature“ opened with a visual retrospective of Shanghai's semi-colonial past. MARTINA CASCHERA (Naples) combined cultural studies with intellectual history in her presentation of early-modern Shanghai's popular cartoons/*manhua*. She chose the phenomenon of an emerging popular culture during the 1920s for her analysis of the conflicting demands of entertainment, aesthetics and the political propaganda of Shanghai's modernity. VIRGINIA Y.Y. LEUNG (Zurich) shifted the attention to another crucial point of

the Asian postmodern configuration, that of Hong Kong. In her exploration of the writings of the so-called southbound literati she tested the applicability of the concept of an originally European genre, that of the Bildungsroman (coming-of-age story), to these literary productions. GIORGIO STRAFELLA (Nottingham / St. Gallen) critically reflected upon Chinese intellectual discourse(s) of the early and mid-1990s, introducing examples of several texts by the influential literary scholar Zhang Yiwu (b. 1962). Strafella examined Zhang's programmatic articles in order to highlight the intellectual strategy of „mis-interpretation“ within North American postmodernism. This strategy allowed Zhang to develop his own critique of the concept of modernity and to promote a new grand narrative for the Chinese multi-national state. JESSICA IMBACH (Zurich) approached the post-1989 era through her close reading of a contemporary example of ghost fiction by Su Tong, which she showed to represent a critical intersection of politics and literature. In her „hauntological“ reading of the short story she highlighted the trend of engagement with ghost topics in the post-Mao literature as not a conservative move, but rather a return to May Fourth ideas of the transformative potential of literature. She argued above all that this trend represents an important engagement with China's ongoing modernisation. In the final presentation, LIU XIAO (Berkeley) introduced a trend of science fiction writing, which emerged in Mainland China in the 1980s following the introduction of Alvin Toffler's ideas of an information society to China. She showed how literary instances introduce the idea of the utopian information society in an adroit and highly subversive mode, thus casting doubts on the progressive enlightenment narrative provided by official ideology.

With the closing presentation it became clear that the overriding topic embodied in the discussions of the last session was that of genre. Speakers and discussants repeatedly pointed to their engagement with the transmutations of the Bildungsroman, ghost lore and science fiction's surprising aesthetisation of the human body in postmodern cultural productions. Furthermore they indicated an

---

ongoing blurring and transgressing of genre borderlines and fictional returns to the remnants of their embattled legacies.

In summary, the workshop created a space for inspiring dialogue across disciplinary boundaries. The focus on theories and methods allowed for fruitful exchanges on one hand and on the other helped to tame the chameleon-like nature of postmodern discourses, which are frequently accused of lacking stable shape, form, location or reference frames. The broadness of contexts within the research projects presented at the workshop underlined an active engagement with a contemporary „moment of lateness“<sup>5</sup> in postmodern cultural imaginaries, as it was chosen for this discussion among young researchers of regionally specific postmodern conditions and their legacies. Finally, the presentations and discussions also showed that aside from their original emancipative and critical potential, certain postmodern discourses now form a significant and recognisable segment within the academic mainstream - and thus may be in need for a less dogmatic and more self-reflective approach.

#### **Conference overview:**

Opening Speech

Andrea Riemenschnitter (Zurich)

#### *Session I: Mnemotopes & Post-Scapes*

Yuzhou Xing (Nanjing): From a Model Village during Mao Era to a Famous Village in Post-socialism: The Reproduction of a Village Landscape

Xiufeng Zhang (Darmstadt): Sophisticated Shanghai: The Urbanism of the Re-globalizing Metropolis

#### *Session II: Gender & Bodies*

Sourav Kargupta (Calcutta): Writing Beings, Representing Bodies: Postmodernism and Women in Difference

Justyna Jaguscik (Zurich, Warsaw): Corporeal Rhetoric in Mainland China's Literature: Feminist Insights or Pornography of Representation

Fusako Innami (Oxford): Haptic Body: The Tension between Active and Passive in Literary Creations by Matsuura Rieko and its App-

lication to Cultural Encounter

Lara Momesso (London): Chinese Spouses in Taiwan: Living across the Strait

Xiaomin Deng (Hong Kong): Heterosexual People who Hide in the Closet - Focusing on the Sexuality Rights of Gay Men's Wives in Mainland China

Dian Maya Safitri (Leiden): Let's Queer the Nation! Piety, Identity, and Social Imagination of the Pesantren Khusus Waria Al-Fattah Senin-Kamis Yogyakarta

#### *Session III: History & Transnational Dynamics*

Thomas Quartermain (Oxford): Multiethnic or Multicultural Society? Problems Faced by South Korea in the Twenty-first Century

Jiang Jie (Lyon): Western Urban Space in the Orient: Hudec's Architectural Heritage in Shanghai (1918-1947). A Research of Urban History

Rudolph Ng (Heidelberg): Reconstructing Coolie Trade in Chinese Historiography

Wang Gang (Berkeley): Loyalty in the Economic Hardship, Resistance in Economic Prosperity – The Paradox of Political Stability in the CCP Regime

#### *Session IV: Cultural Studies & Literature*

Martina Caschera (Naples): Chinese Cartoon, Popular Culture and Early-modern Shanghai Intellectual Scenario

Virginia Y.Y. Leung (Zurich): Transmutations of the European Genre „Bildungsroman“ in Hong Kong Literature during the 1950s

Giorgio Strafella (Nottingham, St. Gallen): Postmodernism as Nationalist Conservatism? The Case of Zhang Yiwu

Jessica Imbach (Zurich): Ghost Politics and the Politics of Ghosts: A reading of Su Tong's „The Completion of the Ritual“

Liu Xiao (Berkeley): Information Reloaded

---

<sup>5</sup> Literary theorist Linda Hutcheon, who is best known for her engagement with postmodern aesthetics, highlighted heavily this actual moment of lateness in postmodernity in her recent lecture at the University of Zurich, 10 of May 2012.

and Wireless Connection to your Brain

Tagungsbericht *Asian Postmodernities and their Legacies*. 30.03.2012-31.03.2012, , in: H-Soz-Kult 25.06.2012.