



*Trends on the Move: Transcultural Dimensions of Popular Flows.* Heidelberg: Project B12 Rethinking Trends, Cluster of Excellence “Asia and Europe in a Global Context”, Heidelberg University, 28.10.2011-29.10.2011.

Reviewed by Xuelei Huang

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## Trends on the Move: Transcultural Dimensions of Popular Flows

The two-day conference “Trends on the Move: Transcultural Dimensions of Popular Flows” was the final event of research project B12 “Rethinking Trends.” At the conference, eleven project members and junior scholars from the Cluster discussed transcultural, historical, and socio-political dimensions of popular global trends with eight senior scholars from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds from the UK, the US, Canada and Germany. The central theme of the conference was to examine trends in consumer culture and popular culture. Papers and talks addressed trends—popular flows via print and digital media, migration, political and ideological movement, as well as marketing and branding.

In her welcome speech, Barbara Mittler (Heidelberg) introduced the project as completely run by PhD students and post-docs. Sinologists and researchers on India, Japan and Europe looked at issues from a comparative perspective. Project member Jennifer Altehenger introduced the history and conceptual structure of the project, as well as the focal concerns and central questions the project has addressed.

The keynote speech was given by JING WANG (Massachusetts). In her talk “Prosumers as Trendsetters: Change Agents on the Social Web,” she examined the impact new media have on branding and trending with a discussion of what she called “prosumers”—network and proactive consumers that emerged accompanying the new technology of web 2.0. She showed a wide array of new media products created by “prosumers” to the audi-

ence. This included political satire, web advertisements, and particular writing styles and phrases which are popular on the internet. In doing so, Jing Wang argued that prosumers were becoming significant trendsetters, not only on commercial markets but also in the world of civic actions. Her case study addressed many of the key concepts of the conference, which relate to local/trans-local flows, trendsetters, agents, networks and the public.

The first panel of the conference focused on transcultural images. LIYING SUN (Heidelberg) talk discussed visual representations of *Freikörperkultur* (Nudism), which originated from Germany, in the Chinese print media in the 1920s and 1930s. She argued that journal editors, publishers and commercial artists served as gatekeepers and they published nudist images not only in order to follow the German (global) trend. Rather, they appropriated and localized nudist images so as to meet nationalistic and commercial demands. JULTEN ABDELHALIM (Heidelberg) examined South Indian women’s adoption of a traditional Arabic female attire, *Pardah*, since the 1970s largely due to labour migration. She pointed out four major factors that had affected the formation of this trend: the growing consumerism as a result of Gulf migration, the disruption of older social and individual values due to Islamic reformist movements and elevated standard of living, the influence of media promoting *Pardah* through editorial pieces or advertisements, and the increasing crime rate in this area that led women to adopt a dress generally perceived as safety-inducer.

The last two talks on this panel explored the ways in which foreign and local women are portrayed in contemporary Chinese and Indian versions of international women's magazines. By looking at Chinese and Indian editions of *Vogue* and *Elle* from the last five years (2005 to 2010), ANNIKA JÄST (Heidelberg) showed that Chinese and Indian women were increasingly represented/photographed like their Western counterpart. The spheres in which self and other exist are no longer set apart but have verged into one large sphere. LAILA ABU-ER-RUB (Heidelberg) further analyzed this new kind of transcultural beauty ideal which still carries some local characteristics but is to a large extent homogenised. She argued that the arrival of consumer culture in Asia through flows of capital, media, people, ideas, and images has contributed to the formation of the trend creating an international look in fashion and advertising.

The panel discussants Susan Ingram (York) and Reminder Kaur Kahlon (Sussex) provided thought-provoking comments on how to rethink the globe and take psychological, anthropological and philosophical aspects into account to further contextualize the case studies examined.

The second panel explored cultural representations of socialism/communism and the flow of socialist cultural products, themes and symbols between the USSR, China, GDR and USA. XUELEI HUANG (Heidelberg) talk focused on the consumption of Soviet movies in pre-Socialist China throughout the 1920s to 1940s, as the prelude to the big trend of Soviet culture's penetration in early Maoist China. She analyzed the multiple agencies of commercialism, geopolitics and collective mentalities that facilitated the shaping of this trend and argued that showing Soviet movies at this stage was primarily a business, not politics. In her talk, JENNIFER ALTEHENDER (Heidelberg) examined three socialist cartoon magazines published in the PRC, the GDR, and the Soviet Union, and their artistic production during the early years of the Cold War. She argued that political cartooning and satire were one example of a larger pan-socialist trend in cultural production, and their development demonstrated the difficulty to streamline satire in the midst of wavering political circumstances and allegiances across the bloc. SEBASTIAN GEHRIG (Heidelberg) discussed the uses of Maoist themes in Western cinema as part of the cultural Cold War. He demonstrated how shifting perceptions of the PRC's role in world politics impacted on the usage of images of China in Western cinema and how Maoist themes failed to become trendy icons with positive meanings in Western societies.

To summarize, this panel demonstrated the power of pan-socialist trends in popular spheres. In their insightful comments and questions on the three papers, Rana Mitter (Oxford) and Matthew Johnson (Grinnell) led the presenters to rethink trends as a critical category and to reconsider trends' move in non-linear routes.

The subject of the third panel was trends in consumer culture. In her talk, CORA JUNGLUTH (Heidelberg) traced the evolution of ecologically sensitive consumption and production in contemporary China and analyzed the issue from three levels, i.e. politics, enterprises and consumers. She addressed the questions including: How do Chinese policy-makers deal with environmental issues? How, by which means and with what intention is awareness within the population created? The focus of BJÄRN-OLE KAMM (Heidelberg) talk was barriers and gatekeepers that emerged in the global flow of Japanese popular culture. He pointed out that the prevailing discourse on Japanese popular culture's global penetration failed to acknowledge how language, technical thresholds, among other things, posed a major obstacle for the emergence of a shared identity via internet communications. He further argued that these gatekeepers shared characteristics with the classical concept of the opinion leader.

LENA HENNINGSEN (Heidelberg) talk on this panel analyzed coffee consumption and the Chinese Starbucks trend as part of consumer culture in contemporary China. Based on interviews with consumers at Starbucks, scribbles from guestbooks and popular literature, she traced patterns of coffee consumption as well as the meaning(s) that are given to such consumption both in cultural texts and by individual consumers. She argued that such international corporations offered their customers the means with which to reflect upon their own lives and the changes in their society. PETRA THIEL (Heidelberg) explored Chinese youth culture and its representations in literature and art through the lens of consumerism. She focused on a particular Chinese youth culture, namely China's Generation X, in order to reveal the complexities and transcultural entanglements in this culture. Flows of brands and desirable objects, their local and global representations within literature and art were central topics of her analysis.

The focal concern of the panel was to examine transcultural trends and their relationship with consumerism, youth culture and urban culture. Discussants Karl Gerth (Oxford) and Harald Fuess (Heidelberg) raised issues concerning green language, ecological protection,

as well as Japan's role in popular consumption, and the latter concluded with a thought-provoking question: "Trends are on the move - but do they ever arrive?"

Finally, in a round-table discussion, all conference participants and invited discussants posed further questions on the problem of national boundaries and on concepts of urbanity (or "glurbanity"), imaginary, network, and materialism and how this may lead to a better understanding of trends and popular flows.

To conclude, this conference situated research on trends within the discourse of the humanities and moved beyond mere quantitative approaches. Conference papers have provided in-depth case studies on various aspects of trends and transcultural flows. Collectively, they have addressed some of the key questions of this project: How to trace the travel routes of particular trends? What are the agents at work to shape trends and itineraries? How do the settings/conditions of consumer society influence the development of specific trends? How do publics (and which publics) influence trends and vice versa? These questions outlined the main academic goals of this conference, and will be further investigated in conference participants' individual research projects. Further information about the conference "Trends on the Move" is available at <http://www.asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de/en/trends-conference/>.

#### Conference overview:

*Panel 1: Mapping Transcultural Images: Gender, Body and Beauty in Consumer Culture*

Liyang Sun: "Whose Health? How to be Beautiful? Incorporating Freikörperkultur (Nudism) into the Chinese Market (1925-1935)"

Julien Abdelhalim: "ISO-Certified Pardahs and the Dislocation of Agency among Muslim Women in Kerala"

Annika Jäckst: "Contemporary Visualisations of For-

eign Women in China's Vogue and Elle - Layers of Othering as a Trend of Consumer Markets"

Laila Abu-Er-Rub: "Striving for an International Look: the Trend of Travelling Beauties in Asia"

Discussants: Susan Ingram and Raminder Kaur Kahlon

#### Keynote Lecture

Jing Wang: "Prosumers as Trendsetters: Change Agents on the Social Web"

#### Panel 2: Mapping Pan-Socialist Cultural Consumption

Xuelei Huang: "The Banality of the Sublime: Consuming Soviet Movies in Pre-socialist China"

Jennifer Altehenger: "Children of the Crocodile: Cartoon Magazines, Political Satire and the Pan-socialist Project in the early PRC and GDR"

Sebastian Gehrig: "The Second 'Evil Empire'? 'Red China' and the 'Yellow Peril' in Cold War Cinema"

Discussants: Matthew Johnson and Rana Mitter

#### Panel 3: Consumer Trends - Trend Consumers: Mapping Growing Markets in China and Japan

Cora Jungbluth: "Creating Desire to save the World - The Evolution of Eco-friendly Consumption in China"

Björn-Ole Kamm: "Gates and their Keys - Language Barriers, Flows and 'Cosmopolitan' Gatekeepers of Japanese Pop Culture"

Lena Henningsen: "Individualism for the Masses? Coffee Consumption and the Chinese Middle Class - Search for Authenticity"

Petra Thiel: "No Logo? China's Branded Youth and Their Representation within Contemporary Chinese Literature and Art"

Discussants: Karl Gerth and Harald Fuess

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

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