



KATRIEN JACOBS

PEOPLE'S PORNOGRAPHY

SEX AND SURVEILLANCE ON THE CHINESE INTERNET

People's Pornography

For the rare birds, with deep respect for their babbling minds

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Sex and Surveillance on the Chinese Internet

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Introduction

This was a key invention of Mao's – to involve the entire population in the machinery of control. Few wrongdoers, according to the regime's criteria, could escape the watchful eyes of the people, especially in a society with an age-old concierge mentality.

Jung Chang, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*

Citizens have the right of ownership of their bodies. They can use it and dispose of it as they want.

Dr. Li Yinhe

This book looks at how Chinese people use pornography and create online sexual identities to experience simple pleasures and to enter a more thorny quest for civil liberties. It also shows how Chinese governments are responding in a paradoxical manner – by denouncing pleasure industries while cultivating them as an area of capitalist expansion. The research for this book came out of my experiences of living and working in Hong Kong, which is a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China and is geographically located at its South Eastern border. It has an autonomous political and legal system and makes for an ideal hub from which to travel around the region and carry out research into the Internet's effect on Chinese sexual pleasures. Hong Kong is also an ideal place to probe into attitudes towards pornography and surveillance culture, as citizens and researchers are by law protected under post-handover free-speech statutes, allowing them to browse and analyze sexually-explicit materials. The Internet itself is uncensored while topics of activism and sexual indiscretions are more-or-less-freely discussed amongst scholars and students.

Mainland web culture is different as all pornography sites and many foreign news sites or social networks are officially banned, even though some of these bans are at times lifted. As a result of erratic bouts of censorship and crackdowns on dissidents, such as the April 2011 detainment of celebrity artist Ai Wei Wei, mainland netizens have become at once savvy and cynical about open Internet culture and larger political changes. When talking about pornography and online sexuality as politically-vitalizing forces, Chinese citizens have a lot at stake, but these topics are sensitive and are very carefully monitored by government. Moreover, since so little research is being done about pornography in China in general, I have taken the opportunity to explore emerging porn culture and porn taste as an aspect of civil sexual emancipation.

Hong Kong's Internet culture is somewhat less flamboyant and fierce than the mainland's but it is, in fact, otherwise supported by excellent scholarly infrastructures and state-endorsed funding schemes. Through various research and arts grants, I was able to collaborate with Cantonese- and Mandarin-speaking research assistants in conducting fieldwork in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China. I worked closely with my team in browsing web sites, searching for raw materials and conducting interviews with people who utilize and interact with sexually explicit materials. It was sometimes difficult to gather these materials and to interview people. When working in mainland China, given its draconian methods of enforcing "social stability," it was hard not to feel paranoid when dealing openly with these sensitive topics. I checked with scholars and students to find out what would be a potential, if not safe route of



Figure 1: Hong Kong woman wearing Ai Wei Wei mask to protest the April 2011 detainment of Chinese celebrity artist Ai Wei Wei. Photograph by Andrew Guthrie.



Figure 2: Protest Poster in defense of Ai Wei Wei made by students at City University of Hong Kong April 2011. The poster depicts the artist sitting on the “Grass Mud Horse,” (草泥馬) the mythic animal that became an Internet meme in 2009 and was used widely to criticize censorship and defend the life of online obscenities. Photograph by Bing Czung.

investigation. I received almost unanimous feedback that pornography was a “safe enough” topic, perhaps even a loophole in a system of tight control over individuals and sexual liberation. Reactions to my project in mainland China were overwhelmingly positive, but I was always glad to be able to withdraw to my safer space of play and reflection – Hong Kong.

Sex and pornography have become central forces in China’s twenty-first-century politics, in its technology and cultural policies and in its blueprints for Internet governance. This book is a Chinese contribution to global pornography debates, which focuses on the attitudes and voices of Chinese (young) adults and the new generation of netizens, and their discussions of aesthetics, taste and pleasure. Beyond or attendant to a uniquely-Chinese perspective on taste, the analysis will be useful in imagining a global future for porn taste and surveillance culture. The book, therefore, is not founded in Western pornography scholarship, but tries to take media theory and civil rights debates beyond a dominant fascination with Western taste in film industries and digital networks.

The Chinese Communist Party aspires to control activism and political movements, yet it also promotes 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 (無害的消費者). Unlike the older generations, who were taught to accept political hardship and poverty, and the imposed abstinence of the Mao years, the younger generations are encouraged to free themselves of these lifestyle constraints. Their experimentation with sexually explicit media is somewhat encouraged if it is used towards a cosmopolitanism with Chinese characteristics (有中國特色的世界主義). These lifestyles are proudly or excessively materialistic, involving a soothing or quenching of “the dangerous passions of politics.” Sex entertainment is a fashion to transcend restrictive local lifestyles but ultimately aims at a kind of patriotism or a social configuration of China's place in the world (Rofel 2007: 121).

Chinese citizens are encouraged to become part of a “New World Dream” (新世界夢想), which has been described in government propaganda as one that situates life within a harmonized “world city.” Brian Holmes has observed how this mythic city is portrayed in terms of endless construction and expansion:

... continuous buildings, endless highways, infinite urbanization, a city beyond the limits of the imagination. Huge urban blocks, surging arteries, expanding ring roads, metros, airports, refineries, power plants, bullet trains, a city that devours the countryside, scraping the mountains and the sky. (Holmes 2008).

The process of entering the world city is often described in Chinese as “jumping in the sea” (下海), an expression that indicates the way that people are forced to leave behind the old securities of communist living and begin to conduct themselves as entrepreneurial risk-takers. As Holmes concludes, the Chinese government has developed a unique if not awkward balance between a normative or repressive political system and wildly-expansive economy of goods and services. This has created a paradoxical sense of openness surrounding the consumerist-oriented youth and sex cultures. China's famous rock star, Cui Jian, or “Old Cui” (老崔) as he is called, elegantly mirrors this point in an interview: “Politics are simply too dangerous. It tears into your soul and ruins your life” (Williams 1997).

Even though the sexual indiscretions portrayed in this book are uniquely Chinese, they also typify a future for global sex culture as they are driven by global corporate ownership and attitudes of benign consumerism or public acquiescence. Mimi Sheller has developed a “mobilities theory” in order to rethink the study of modern cultures impacted by the global infrastructures of neo-liberalism. Sheller's work analyzes the impact of virtual tourism in the Caribbean region, showing how IT corporations and creative industries are imposing global imaginaries of upward mobility and commerce. These sites of alluring and soothing virtuality create novel lifestyles and work opportunities for the local population, but also produce obvious sites of destitution and lethargy. (Sheller 2007: 18) Similarly, as a result of a new kind of sexual virtuality that affects Chinese cities and even rural localities, people

are increasingly partaking in transnational networks for personal matters of romance and sex work. People almost organically project their bodies and minds into global domains and networks, yet they have to hide these impulses when dealing with traditional forms of government and/or family planning. A paradoxical ethos of pleasure and depression/denial controls the growth of sex industries, with more room for satisfaction and hypocrisy amongst privileged classes. Besides arguing for the acceptance and democratization of porn industries and sex entertainment, the book reveals the underground cultures of art and activist disobedience, those who show strength, humor and difference within the wasteland of Chinese pornography education.

One famous case of the political persecution of a sex radical that took place in mainland China in 2010 was that of Professor Ma Xiaohai of Nanjing (南京某大學教授马晓海). Professor Ma was sentenced to three-and-a-half years in prison for “crowd licentiousness” after he engaged in casual group sex as a swinger. Even though hundreds of thousands of Chinese people are trying out similar lifestyles through online hook-up platforms, there are ancient Chinese obscenity laws against multi-partner sex or “hooliganism.” Professor Ma would have been free to pursue his passions in most other nation states, and he spoke eloquently and confidently about casual sex in various statements, but few Chinese public commentators defended or stood up for him when he received an excessive jail sentence (Wong 2010). Mainland academia is perhaps overtly associated with values of state-enforced intellectual responsibility and bodily denial and, hence, would foster little public support for an academic “sex machine” such as Professor Ma.

One exception in this pattern of complacency or fear of difference is by one of China’s leading sexologist, Dr. Yinhe of the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences (北京社科院李銀河博士), who defended Professor Ma as a progressive thinker and activist in defense of sexual minorities. She argued that Professor Ma was wrongly accused as there were no victims involved and the sex acts took place in a private space amongst consenting adults. Most cases of “crowd licentiousness” (swinging, orgies, etc.) have been dropped in China, indicating that the Nanjing police force must be extremely conservative. Dr. Li Yinhe added that the media buzz around Professor Ma shows that China was opening up to alternative lifestyles. As she stated in a video interview on joy.cn:

I do not agree with swinging, neither do I like it. But if consenting couples want to do it because of aesthetic fatigue, they bring no harm to the society or to themselves. To my knowledge, couples who practice swinging enjoy better marital relationships than general couples. Only couples who are really intimate can communicate this well and not be jealous about it. It’s a feature of the swingers. They are doing it because they are curious or they like it this way. I defend the right of minorities. (Li 2010)

The Chinese Internet has made for a broader space for unorthodox lifestyles and social discourses. While ancient obscenity laws are still in place and are occasionally applied to persecute sex radicals or porn distributors, Chinese netizens are nevertheless engaged in

a kind of revolt (Hu 2009: 16). As will be shown in the analysis of activism and blogging discourses, sexuality constitutes a powerful “animal force” as netizens seize the opportunity to and take part in pornography’s inter-connected political debates.

But at the same time, the force of governmental interference and anti-obscenity campaigns culminated in mainland China in 2009, when seven different government agencies collaborated and issued a televised report concerning the “Anti-Vulgarity Political Campaign” (反三俗政治運動). In Fall 2010, it was reported that 1,332 Chinese citizens had been convicted by the Supreme People’s Court for “spreading pornography” through the internet and text messages. Fifty-eight of those convicted had been jailed for five years or more and the youngest person convicted was 19 years old. (South China Morning Post [SCMP] 2010)

Several commentators adopted the term of “Confucian Confusion” to describe the discrepancy between the government’s sex-phobic morality and the commercially-sponsored or citizen-driven networks for sexual entertainment. It took me some time to wrap my head around this “CC” but I eventually realized that I had to exploit it as a crack within the system. Neither antiquated phobias nor sexual freedom can stand alone in this circumstance, but will exemplify the quarreling and discordant forces in contemporary Chinese society. As argued by Feng Chien-san (馮建三) in *Info Rhizome*, it is vital for scholars to make use of these internal quarrels within the state apparatus: “There are countless reasons for internal conflicts taking place within the state apparatus, and it is up to us to punch our needles into the fissures whenever they appear” (Feng 2009: 18).

Let us further probe this “porn crack” by means of an anecdote. Towards the end of my writing process, an informant sent me more evidence that Chinese netizens are sharing sexually explicit materials on peer-to-peer file-sharing sites hosted on overseas servers. Then he added that the “porn sites” that Chinese netizens are most frequently using are those that are actually linked to banned news items. So the circulation of sexually explicit media is somewhat safer than the banned news about political topics. In formulating this unique coalescence of sexual and political curiosity, my book is indebted to Matteo Pasquinelli, who has helped me formulate a critical yet sex-positive perspective on emerging netporn cultures (色情文化振興). In his book *Animal Spirits: A Bestiary of the Commons*, Pasquinelli looks at different mythical animals and how they might constitute useful symbols for conceptualizing power within new media culture. Just as political leaders and CEO’s of world-class institutions can appropriate lions, snakes and dragons as emblems of power, media artists can reclaim mythical creatures, and their animalistic power instincts (Pasquinelli 2009). This perspective is valuable in coming to an understanding of erotic activism in mainland China where one such humorous symbol of sexual rebellion is the “Grass Mud Horse” (草泥马), which was invented to collectively criticize government propaganda. The Grass Mud Horse is one of twelve fictional creatures that were invented on the web-based encyclopedia Baidu Baike (百度百科) and whose names closely resemble profanities in the Chinese language. Even though the surreal animal-figures and their associated mythologies were officially banned in 2009, they had already conquered the Internet and were circulated by those in favor of open Internet culture and sexual entertainment.

Erotic energy and a collective sense of humor have helped netizens to keep up with a joyful variety of activism, one where contentious identities can be developed and indulged. The ability to escape from restrictive cultural attitudes through Internet culture and to question the immense pressures of a national surveillance culture constitutes a sense of freedom and vitality. These types of freedom provide entertainment and relief but do not entail a deeper disruption of power mechanisms, which would indeed require a more thorough desire for transformation.

Chinese netizens express that they feel crushed and disrespected by Chinese and Western models of control alike. For instance, it became apparent during the China Google incident of 2010 that the vying owners of the Internet – the dictatorial governments and Internet corporations – were both spying on netizens to build their networks of power and control. As explained by Tricia Wang:

Google and China have their own visions for the social life of information and for the role of information in society. We should be equally critical of a corporation with algorithms that create a consensual consumer culture based on advertising clicks as we are of a country with policies that create a consensual citizenry based on obedience through a paternalistic form of governance. (Wang 2010)

Netizens should be critical of both of these seemingly-opposed power blocs as their browsing paths are continually tested and modulated by archaic government rhetoric and an expansionist consumer culture.

Rather than relying on massive corporate networks or popular culture for social change, smaller cross-border initiatives may be more useful in creating a vibrant media culture. Rebecca MacKinnon has noted that, despite the Internet being a globalizing force, online media communities have had “a natural tendency to focus inward toward the local rather than outward across borders” (MacKinnon 2009: 11). MacKinnon argues for the locally-oriented protection and improvement of civil liberties while being inspired by models of cross-border activism and solidarity. One example of this type of civil disobedience can be found in the work of Hong Kong activist Oiwan Lam. “Don’t Turn Hong Kong into a Mono-coloured Ghost City” was the title of a famous Internet article posted by Lam in 2007. Lam believed that Hong Kong’s sex culture was threatened by a tunnel-vision mentality fostered by its rapidly-expanding hyper materialism. In an interview with the website Interlocals.net, Lam criticized the Obscene Articles Tribunal and argued that Hong Kong is losing its identity as a multicultural city by adopting the ideals of conservative-bourgeois materialism. (Lam 2007) In an act of civil disobedience, she urged web users to post pornographic hyperlinks on the local indie media server in order to protest against Hong Kong’s growing materialism and tightening obscenity laws. Lam herself uploaded an artistic photograph of a naked woman by Jake Applebaum that she had found on the social networking and photography-sharing site Flickr. This act of civil disobedience was tracked down by conservative citizens who filed a complaint to the Obscene Articles Tribunal (淫褻物品審裁處/淫審法庭) and Wan was then prosecuted for breaking obscenity laws.



Figure 3. Photograph by Jake Applebaum, hyperlinked by Oiwan Lam to the Hong Kong Inmedia server. Lam was sued for linking to this photograph by the Hong Kong Obscene Articles Tribunal (OAT).

Lam meticulously documented her court case on her blog and other international websites in order to criticize these developments in Hong Kong sex culture. As we can understand from her conflict with local organizations, Internet activism has paved the way for a unique type of international discussion and support.

The era of user-generated Internet content also allows netizens and micro-groups to represent their sexual bodies and to distribute sexually explicit materials. Pornography has moved away from a male-oriented consumer market and has become a medium for other user groups such as women and queers to define sexual selves within media networks. There is also room for artists and activists to open up and critique the homogeneous products of transnational commerce. Web users can suggest new definitions and aesthetic variations of the body and body types, while pornography can move away from the more predictable sites and products. Besides revealing the interplay between empowerment and abjection within these cultures of mobility, this book addresses the need for locating new possibilities for Chinese eroticism. It searches for a specific erotic heritage amongst a wealth of contemporary products and lifestyles that are still dominated by overseas markets. Since these markets do not necessarily promote a knowledge of cultural differences, it is important for Chinese sex culture to embrace local histories of pornography or artistic eroticism.

For instance, art critic Bourree Lam makes a plea for the revival of the Hong Kong film industry's glory days of soft-core erotica or *Fengyue* films (風月片). This unique collection of 1970s' movies produced by the Shaw Brothers has soft-erotic tales for the general theater-goer that also incorporate other film genres. These movies can be seen as an artistically-developed and pornographic imagination. (Lam 2009) Yau Ching (游靜) has shown the importance of recovering these erotic movies, as in the work of *fengyue* film maker Li Han-siang (李翰祥) who reworked seventeenth-century tales of licentiousness from the late Ming Dynasty (Yau 2010: 118). For example, in his movies and newspaper columns, Li was at times inspired by female outcast personalities such as the famous Shanghai courtesan Wang Wenlan, a high-class prostitute who could attract powerful males and would openly comment on their sexual performance or the size of their genitals. Some of Li's female characters differ from the model of female sexual subjugation as they are "endowed with sharp-sightedness, courage to both love and hate, a strong sense of self-determination, and a feisty can-do-it-all spirit; they are shrews, sluts, dreamers and fighters at once" (Yau 2010: 120). These go-getting characters offer positive alternatives to the overly-clichéd and generic tropes of gender and sexual allure in male-oriented erotic cinema and commercial pornography. They show signs of a spiritualized sexuality that expands and deconstructs flattened visions of gender and sexual compatibility. They also contest overly-moralistic points of view and the practices of procreative heterosexuality. The styles and themes of these movies are refreshing and make room for honest depictions of Chinese "colorful" fantasies.

This book also seeks to discuss new waves of DIY pornography and associated mass media scandals, which allow people to both snoop on sexual novelties and contemplate sexual excesses. Attitudes of curiosity and condemnation accompany these mediated sex

scandals, allowing people to get educated about media and sexuality. Mainland China attempts to stigmatize sex and pornography by equating it with excessive Internet use. The questionable psychological diagnosis of “online addiction” is rampant and Internet culture as such is equated with a severe threat to Confucianism – its uniquely Chinese character and idealized sense of responsible personhood. In “Just Like the Qing Empire: Internet addiction, MMOGs, and moral crisis in Contemporary China,” Golub and Lingley (2008) show that online anti-addiction campaigns reveal a social unease concerning foreign cultural infiltration and its poisonous influences (如鴉片般滲入毒害中國的外來文化). China's cosmopolitanism has engendered parallel visions of decay and downfall. Online addiction (上網成癮) and Internet culture itself are located as a source of evil. The youth mobs who excel in these lifestyles and frames of mind are described with the verb “pao” (泡) – a state of mind experiencing decay and exhaustion like the bubbling but quickly-fading effervescence of a soft drink. Golub and Lingley describe this diagnosis this way:

To a certain extent, we can say that Internet addicts “fritter” away their time at Internet cafes, but pao can also be translated as “to steep” (the action performed by tea leaves in boiling water) as an image of dissolution of concentrated efficacy and flavor out of the body into the wider environment. (Golub 2008: 70)

In recent years scholars have become more adept at deconstructing a rhetoric of pathology associated with online addiction. Several leading academic publishers have now issued ethnographic studies about what it means to be immersed in virtual communities such as *Second Life* (第二人生) and *World of Warcraft* (魔兽世界). Within this area of virtual world immersion, sociologists and anthropologists are interested in rethinking the spaces between online fantasy and physical spaces. (Anderson 2010) Bonnie Nardi has investigated collaborations amongst World of Warcraft gamers in the USA and China, as they occupy a digital-physical ecology influenced by socio-economics, government regulations and cultural value systems. Nardi has also dissected her own life and experiences as Night Elf Priest in World of Warcraft in order to get a deeper and embodied understanding of the peculiarities of human play and its social behaviors (Nardi 2010: 6).

In a similar manner, the different chapters of this book will present various incarnations of people's sexual immersion and how it has empowered, and conflicted with, their identities. Chapter 1, “The Cyber Yellow Disaster: From the Everyday Gaze to Nation-State Espionage,” introduces the changes in sex industries and commercial porn sites that affect consumption in mainland China. This chapter posits that China is living in a joyful era of “people's pornography” and media activism despite government warnings about a “cyber yellow disaster” (網絡黃禍). At the same time, the ubiquitous gaze of government-imposed censorship and its attendant sex-negative rhetoric has been internalized and atomized by multiple instances of netizen-driven surveillance and sex-phobic governance. The chapter also presents the work of artists and netizens who uncover China's burgeoning sex/porn industries. For instance, the undercover researcher Tiantian Zheng created a double identity