

## Introduction to the *JAS* at AAS Roundtable on “Sexuality and the State in Asia”

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ATTENDEES OF THE 2012 Association for Asian Studies (AAS) annual conference in Toronto were treated to two extraordinary speeches at the presidential address and awards ceremony. First, Charlotte Furth's acceptance of the AAS Award for Distinguished Contributions to Asian Studies was a primer in the history of China-related gender studies (Furth 2012). Then, as Rachel Leow discusses in her paper in this forum, outgoing AAS President Gail Hershatter followed up with an inspirational critique (reprinted in this issue) of the current state of gender and sexuality studies in China. Taken together, these two speeches showed how far gender and sexuality studies in Asia have come in the last forty years, but also suggested that it is time for some fresh approaches. For example, Furth explained that when the *Cambridge History of China* volumes on Republican China were commissioned, she and others argued strenuously for the inclusion of a chapter on gender; but in the end, one could not be written because no one had yet done the scholarship on which such a chapter could be based. Fortunately, all of this has changed: the scholarship is there now. But Hershatter quite rightly pointed out that it is time to rethink many of the categories of analysis we have been using, because they are preventing us from asking questions we should be asking, and therefore making us miss the meanings of crucial social events and phenomena.

The papers in this forum, coming out of the *JAS* at AAS roundtable, focus on just this problem: what we miss when we use received categories of analysis in thinking about gender and sexuality. These pieces reaffirm the important point that gender and sexuality are mutable categories, across both time and space. For example, in the case of gender, they make the historical observation that people have not always and everywhere thought about gender as being dichotomous and connected to only two totally different kinds of bodies, male and female. Or, in the case of sexuality, different physical characteristics (in Tokugawa Japan, as Pflugfelder illustrates, the forelocks of the youth, or *wakashu*; in China, the bound female foot) are deemed sexually attractive in different times and places for reasons that to most of us now seem indecipherable since we are

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not trained to appreciate that aesthetic. In short, there is a call in the historical pieces here to try to understand sexuality and gender from the perspective of the time and place in which they were situated. Furthermore, there is a call to examine them through a wider variety of means, symbols, and markers (e.g., sartorial and tonsorial visual cues; songs, poetry, and oral religious teachings; popular culture) than we are used to employing. And, finally, they urge us to go beyond the limiting contemporary vocabulary and analytical tools of gender and sexuality: the dichotomies of male vs. female, heterosexual vs. homosexual, and so on. Doing so can, of course, be very challenging because it requires, as Chatterjee argues, a kind of linguistic and cultural fluency that is difficult for an outsider—by virtue of time or culture—to achieve. It can be difficult, too, because it sometimes requires us to accept, on their own terms, practices and understandings that we, here and now, find repellent. And perhaps even more to the point, it is difficult because it requires us to try to understand practices and shades of meaning that we may simply not even notice or find relevant because they are so different from our own.

One of the problems that the authors identify is that using a gender lens alone, or a sexuality lens alone, may not be enough to explain with any degree of complexity the experiences of people's lives or how institutions related to sexuality and gender work. For example, both Pflugfelder and Leow advocate using a sort of "gender plus" approach and have homed in on the idea of age as being a crucial aspect of sexuality and gender, one without which we do not get the whole picture. Pflugfelder argues that the category of "youth," *wakashu*, was a sort of third gender in late Tokugawa and early Meiji Japan. In Leow's piece, she argues that we may entirely miss major aspects of the problems and anxieties associated with *mui tsai* (young female bondservants) and the Modern Girl if we restrict our analysis to gender and omit age or generation as being crucial to understanding who they were and what they symbolized. Age may even be a much more salient social category than gender, she argues, in understanding the lived experience of these women and girls. In the cases of China, the subcontinent, and Japan, it seems to me that additional attention to the connections between gender, sexuality, and caste or other kinds of historical legal status distinction might also prove important.

Finally, the papers reiterate an important point about how state control, and transformation, of sexuality is related to political control. That is, the states under study had agendas related to sexuality, and ways of ordering sexuality, that were important parts of an overall strategy of rule. Chatterjee asks us to examine more closely how ideas around sexuality were part of precolonial governance in the subcontinent, with monastic teachings including matters not only of politics, philosophy, and self-cultivation, but also of sexuality, gender, and family, all combined together in a whole. This helps us understand why the British colonial strategy of dismantling extant structures of family, gender, and sexuality and replacing them with sexually dimorphic, patrilineal, nuclear families was important to establishing colonial rule: existing ideas about and practices of sexuality and gender were

inextricably tied to political rule in the precolonial regime. In Leow's essay, we can see the British colonial regimes in Southeast Asia struggling with similar problems in dealing with *mui tsai*, whose liminal status in the household was challenging to new British ideas of the sanctity of childhood and the immorality of slavery, and also, potentially, threatening to the institution of monogamous marriage if *mui tsai* had sexual relationships with their masters. In similar ways, Pflugfelder also shows how Meiji reformers worked to eliminate the *wakashu* sexual identity because it did not conform to the very same gender dichotomy embraced by the British colonial regime on the subcontinent. A powerful, modern state and people should have a modern sexuality, the reformers believed, and so eliminating such "backwards" practices, along with concubinage and so on, had to be part of the political agenda. In China, similar moves were underfoot throughout the first half of the twentieth century via state efforts to dismantle the longstanding Qing order, which itself had rested so heavily on a foundation of control over sexuality to maintain social order (Mann 2011). Those efforts included means such as curbing or controlling concubinage, prostitution, child marriage, and the keeping of *mui tsai*. It is quite interesting to observe how all these states moved to create a similar vision of gender and sexuality even though the states themselves were rather different: British colonial, modernizing Meiji, and declining Qing/struggling Republican states. Without a doubt, these states made powerful inroads in recreating gender and sexuality in their societies.

One direction I hope that the scholarship will take in the future is in thinking about how enforcing these new visions of gender and sexuality shaped the states themselves. How did the strategies and mechanisms developed to enforce the new gender and sexual orders, for example vice squads or health inspectors, transform the size, shape, and function of those states? And what new possibilities for control and increased state capacity, beyond matters directly related to sexuality and gender, were created by it, such as new sources of state revenue or new institutional structures? One also has to wonder whether types of states other than the modern European national state have pursued their visions of sexuality and gender with quite so much vigor.

#### THE "BEAUTIFUL MAN" IN CHINA

In his essay "Popular Culture and Masculinity Ideals in East Asia, with Special Reference to China," Kam Louie discusses the emergence in recent years of a new ideal of Chinese masculinity, the "beautiful man," alongside the older "salaryman" (or corporate warrior) and "metrosexual" images of desirable masculinity. This has happened, he argues, as a result of new trends in media crossing Chinese, Japanese, and South Korean national borders. The resulting masculine ideal is thus present across the region, and as a result is not closely tied to national identity. The "beautiful man" is "softer," uncompetitive, romantic,

and emotional, and competent in traditionally feminine pursuits like cooking, but also tough and adept at conventionally male pursuits such as martial arts. While the older models have been defined by those with conventional masculine power within patriarchy, the “beautiful man” ideal stands this on its head: it is conventionally powerless groups, women and young consumers of pop culture, who now have the power to define what a desirable male sexuality is. They do so through such means such as watching and voting in *American Idol*-style singing contests, buying the music of K-pop and J-pop boy bands, and consuming manga and television serials about “beautiful men.” Louie also implies that the young women who support this image of a “sexy man” seem to prefer a more androgynous femininity as well. We might wish to ask, to what extent are young men in fact seeking to emulate this model of masculinity? Does the relative shortage of young Chinese women lead young men to become “softer,” conforming to what they think potential marriage partners want, in order to attract a mate? Or is this ideal something that only inhabits the minds of young women?

Putting this piece into the context of the others in this forum raises an interesting question: how does age figure into this new model of masculinity? Taking into account Pflugfelder and Leow’s insights about age and generation as a category of analysis complementary to gender, we have to wonder: is the “beautiful man” always and only a young man? Is the ideal the construction of young women, and will those women still find it admirable as they age? That is, will middle-aged women define what desirable middle-aged male sexuality is by using these standards, too, as something that that generation prefers? Or will they “grow out of it,” the ideal remaining the property of the young? Will the beautiful young men discard their beauty and grow up to meet the breadwinner standard of masculinity against which older, married men are held in East Asia, or will the corporate warrior disappear with the new generation, along with salaryman jobs?

Finally, one intriguing difference between Louie’s discussion of the “beautiful man” ideal and the other papers in this roundtable is the state’s *silence* about the model’s challenge to conventional sexuality. Louie argues that the Chinese Ministry of Culture limited and then shut down the *Idol*-style television show *Super Girl Contest* because the winners of the contest did not conform to accepted models of femininity. But what about the beautiful men? It is quite a significant change if the PRC state, which of course in the past has had so very much to say about appropriate models of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality, has done little to intervene in this new development. What exactly it means—a new freedom of self-expression, perhaps?—still remains to be seen.

#### STATE AND SEXUALITY IN THE SUBCONTINENT OVER THE *LONGUE DURÉE*

As the title of Indrani Chatterjee’s rich and multilayered piece “When ‘Sexuality’ Floated Free of Histories in South Asia” indicates, Chatterjee wishes for us

to consider how teaching about, learning about, and controlling sexuality was an integral part of precolonial political rule by monastic lineages, part of what she calls the monastic governmentality, on the Indian subcontinent. British colonial rule erased that, setting apart sexuality as something ostensibly separate from political rule. It did so by branding existing practices and structures of gender and sexuality as subcultural deviations from the colonially defined norm of two genders, heterosexual, monogamous, patrilineal families, and so on, and used the legal system and other means to create a sexual landscape more acceptable to their sensibilities and political needs. This approach nicely highlights how sexuality and forms and methods of political rule are intertwined, and in particular how state control of sexuality/gender can be an important form of political control. Both the precolonial and colonial states had particular visions of sexuality, or, to put it a different way, had something to say about what we now call sexuality.

And that really is the second major point of the essay: part of what Chatterjee is critiquing here is the ahistorical approach that twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century feminists, scholars, and activists have taken to studying gender and sexuality on the subcontinent. They sought, she argues, to look for a precolonial Indian patriarchy analogous to the patriarchy that exists, in their eyes at least, in rather undifferentiated form around the contemporary world. Chatterjee argues that this is a mistake: they were in fact taking concepts and ideas from our current conceptions of gender/patriarchy and looking for them in past times and places where they did not exist. Instead, she argues that we should analyze gender and sexuality from the perspective of the time and place under study. Attempts to analyze what we now call sexuality and gender during the precolonial period using a dichotomous gender lens not only blinds us to some important things that were happening, but also may cause us to misunderstand some other things quite profoundly. That is, forms of family, sexual relationships, gender, property inheritance, and so on varied widely across time and place within the subcontinent, and ahistorical analysis applying anachronistic categories cannot capture that variation. Neither, Chatterjee argues, can strict adherence to easily accessible, English-language historical (colonial) sources. Instead, scholars must work harder to gain access to the sensorium involved in the histories of sexualities, which includes among other things music, poetry, courtly rules, and courtesan tales, and requires knowledge of “older . . . grammars, epistemes, and ontologies.” This is indeed one of the most difficult things about studying the history of sex, sexuality, and gender: decoding desires and ideas that are part of much larger systems of meanings than just “sex” or “gender,” but that touch just about every aspect of social life, including politics, religion, family, art, music, and philosophy. Gaining mastery of this much material is quite an undertaking for any one scholar, but it seems to me that Chatterjee’s call for us to attempt it is quite right. She is, in a sense, throwing down the same gauntlet that Paul Cohen (1984) did in his foundational work on Chinese political history, *Discovering History in China*: a challenge to write in his case

a China-centered political history, and in hers, a subcontinent-centered history of sexuality, or perhaps sexualities, and gender.

#### “YOUTH,” MATERIAL CULTURE, AND GENDER IN LATE TOKUGAWA AND MEIJI JAPAN

Gregory M. Pflugfelder’s essay urges us to think beyond the linguistic discourse around sexuality—that is, the words people use to talk about sexuality—and to consider what nonverbal forms of communication can teach us about it. In particular, he argues that we can unearth some aspects of sexuality, even to the point of broadening our understanding of what “the genders” were in Tokugawa and early Meiji Japan, by looking at objects of visual and material culture rather than the written word. Examining depictions of sartorial and tonsorial conventions adhered to by young Japanese men constituting the social category of “youth” (*wakashu*) reveals that *wakashu* was, in a sense, more or less a third gender. And, when the Meiji government sought to eliminate the social category of *wakashu* because it did not fit neatly into the “modern” gender binary, it went about doing so by banning the hairstyles and clothing that were the only reliable markers of *wakashu* status. My own research on regulated prostitution in late Qing and Republican China (Remick 2007) has turned up many examples of local Chinese governments attempting to exert control over women’s sexuality through either banning or requiring the use of particular hairstyles, clothing, and markers such as badges, so this insight about the Meiji state strikes me as being particularly interesting.

Pflugfelder makes a convincing case for a gender triad. Both women and *wakashu* were the objects of mature men’s sexual desire. Such sexual desire for *wakashu* did not fit into a definition of homosexuality, because it presumed that mature men and youth were two separate categories, not a single (homo) social category. Sex between mature men and *wakashu* also did not violate social norms because, as was assumed to be the case, as long as the (mature) man was the penetrator, regardless of the recipient’s gender, then he was behaving in a properly masculine fashion. And as long as a *wakashu* maintained all the proper markers of his social status—the long forelocks and the long, swinging kimono sleeves—then he was also performing his proper gender role. This idea that social status is more important than what we now call sexual orientation is echoed in early imperial China, as Matthew Sommer (2000, 118) has argued; in his words, tales of male-male sexual liaisons from that era “tend to locate homosexual penetration in a context in which *status* domination apparently overrode any disturbing aspect of gender inversion.” In other words, as long as the penetrating man was of higher social status than the one being penetrated, it was not socially or legally meaningful that a man was being penetrated “like a woman.” It seems to me that this intersection of social/legal status categories and sexuality is another fruitful area for future research.

One interesting aspect of the *wakashu* identity raises some questions about how one might go about using age as a category of analysis. As Pflugfelder argues, *wakashu* status was not strictly defined by the number of years a man had lived, i.e., his calendrical age, or by his physical or sexual development (facial hair, puberty), but rather by the easily changed external markers of hairstyle and dress alone. This raises the possibility that “age” is not quite the right word for what we are talking about. One has to wonder, is the Modern Girl discussed by Leow just as defined by tonsorial and sartorial markers as the *wakashu*? As Leow mentions, we do not really know how to categorize older women who wore the shorter hair and characteristic clothing of the Modern Girl, and whether those markers signified that the older women were thought to be as sexually liberated and so on as their presumably younger counterparts.

#### AGE OVER GENDER IN THE ANALYSIS OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN WOMEN’S LIVES

The main argument in Rachel Leow’s piece “Age as a Category of Gender Analysis” is that gender analysis divorced from analysis based on other social categories does not and cannot allow us to comprehend fully how people (in her case, in Southeast Asia) experience gender or, more broadly, other aspects of their lives. Gender might better be employed analytically in conjunction with—and in some cases, even be supplanted by—other categories of analysis such as age, since those other categories are so crucial to people’s lived experiences. Leow uses the examples of *mui tsai* and the Modern Girl to illustrate that we miss seeing crucial things about who they were, why their existence caused anxiety for others, and how they interacted with the state if we view them only as girls, rather than as girls of a particular age. There are indeed situations where, in her words, “age complicates or trumps gender.” For example, the abolition of *mui tsai* in British colonial Malaya and elsewhere in the British Empire in East Asia came about not because colonial officials found arguments about improving the lot of females convincing, but because they found arguments about protecting children and childhood convincing. Leow also argues that the Modern Girl’s youth, rather than her gender, may have been the most salient and anxiety-producing aspect of her identity.

I think that the basic idea here about not relying on gender as the sole category of social analysis is a good one. Leow quite rightly points out that the status “*mui tsai*” was bounded by age and that we do not really know what happened to these girls after they grew too old to continue in that status. What is the next stage? In the anthropological literature on gender and family in China, we do have some studies that may help lay the groundwork for thinking through this sort of thing. Here I am thinking of foundational works, such as Margery Wolf’s on the uterine family (Wolf 1972), which show clearly how women’s and men’s roles and relationships change across the life cycle. To put it another

way, Wolf's work shows how women experience their gender in one way as a daughter, in another (subordinated) way as a daughter-in-law, and yet another (dominant) way as a mother-in-law during their life course. And indeed the broader feminist literature does examine the progression of stages in men's and women's lives—for women, from girls, to objects of sexual desire, to mothers, and on to either crones or wise women. In short, there is some basis in the existing anthropological literature for conducting analysis grounded in both gender and age.

And indeed, for at least forty years, feminists have, as Leow points out, been talking about how gender and other forms of identity (race, class, caste, ethnicity, sexual identity, etc.) all intersect. Women (and men too, of course) often do not experience gender in the same way given their other social identities, and sometimes being a member of a particular race, class, ethnicity, etc. is more salient to someone's life than his or her gender. Feminist scholarship tells us to be alert to how women relate to each other across social class, for example when we look at paid domestic labor in which two women are more separated by social class than united by their gender (e.g., anthropological work such as Constable [1997]). At some points Leow suggests that we should simply abandon gender analysis in favor of, for example, an age-based analysis, but it seems to me that that would create problems of overreliance on a new, single analytical category. The question, then, is how precisely one can perform an analysis taking all these social categories into account without abandoning altogether the idea of writing a single gendered history or story, in favor of writing multiple fractured histories or stories about poor/young/Japanese/women, rich/old/Indian/women, lesbian/Fujianese/Buddhist/women, ad infinitum. On the other hand, maybe that is exactly what we need to do.

Taken together, these thoughtful essays suggest new methods for studying gender, sexuality, and the state in Asia, and also open up new areas of inquiry. I, for one, look forward to seeing where they take us next.

*This essay is dedicated to Christina Gilmartin, a founder of the study of gender within China studies and a wonderful colleague, who passed away during its writing.*

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