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BOOK REVIEW

Old Vices, New Technology: Chinese People Accessing Pornography

People's Pornography: Sex and Surveillance on the Chinese Internet. By Katrien Jacobs. Chicago, IL: Intellect, 2012, 203 pages. Paperback, \$25.00.

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Scholars of China and its East Asian neighbors are well aware of the region's long-standing histories of sexuality, pornography, erotica, and sex-related industries (van Gulik, 1974; Brownell & Wasserstrom, 2002). *People's Pornography* contributes to sex and sexuality studies in Asia by addressing how technology enables people to circumvent government surveillance to create new social spaces in cyberspace. These spaces allow people to explore pornography, sex, and emerging sexual identities despite the rigid policies set forth by the Chinese Communist Party. Jacobs explains that her book "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" (p. 13). I regard *People's Pornography* as an expanded version of the case study discussed in the final chapter of Jacobs's second book, *Netporn: DIY Web Culture and Sexual Politics* (Jacobs, 2007), which focuses mainly on exploring how the Internet facilitates amateur porn culture in the United States and Western cultures.

The unique contribution of *People's Pornography* is Jacobs's cataloging of how technology has enabled burgeoning amateur porn producers, erotic artists, and sex-related entrepreneurs to create sex entertainment for a heteronormative male market primarily in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. The Internet allows people in mainland China to participate in officially censored sexual pleasure-seeking activities with counterparts living in censor-free Taiwan and Hong Kong. Exploring this theme, Jacobs organizes a disparate set of topics to systematically address cross-border exchanges in politicized art and pornographic photographs, sex-blogging culture, gendered youth perceptions and expectations in light of shifting sexual terrains, sex-partner advertising sites, and "queer" performance among anime fans and costume players.

Covering such disparate topics means that Jacobs deploys a bevy of research methods, including content

analysis of sex bloggers and former prostitutes turned political artists, archival review of interview transcripts with Chinese cybersex celebrities, surveys of her college students, ethnographic fieldwork in Mainland Chinese cafés and public spaces to test access to banned sites, establishing of a profile on AdultFriendFinder.com for participant observation and interviews with site users, attending cosplay conventions, and shadowing the on/off lives of "queer" individuals to document how technology has enabled them to live alternative lifestyles.

Jacobs begins by describing the relationship between government surveillance and Mainland China's shifting patterns of consumption of sex industries and commercial porn sites. Jacobs focuses on how artists (including Ai Weiwei, Siu Ding, and Yu Na), *netizens* (Internet users who identify with tech culture), and the burgeoning porn industries circumvent the Chinese government's official bans on pornography. The subsequent chapters are wide-ranging, including coverage of Chinese sex bloggers; discussion of her college students' views about the Internet; and analysis of her interviews with East Asian men and women who used AdultFriendFinder.com to solicit Caucasian lovers. She also examines the Pan-Asian expansion of "queer" performance and affinity for Japanese animation (anime), virtual fantasy, and costume play (cosplay), arguing that anime fans perform "queerness" as a means to transgress local Chinese prohibitions and restrictive social norms.

Her conclusion implies perhaps that the technological outlets afforded through the Internet and cosplay at conventions may not be enough to satiate emerging sexual scripts or desires for alternative identities. Throughout the book, Jacobs includes spicy quotes from online surveys, celebrity interviews, and excerpts from bloggers and sex diarists, adding real flavor to the political debate about surveillance and individual sexual and civil liberties.

Jacobs contributes to the craft of sexuality research in a number of ways. First, the text is bold enough to include explicit illustrations to help novice readers visually comprehend the social (and sexual) climate in China. The text is replete with photos and reproductions of imagery of sexual and civil liberties protesters, artists with political agendas, still shots from controversial erotic movies such as Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution*, Japanese manga and anime, digital illustrations, homegrown amateur sex videos popping up on the mainland, and photos documenting access to banned pornographic websites. The majority of these materials are officially banned in

Mainland China, so Jacobs includes photos as visual evidence to demonstrate how netizens use technology to circumvent government surveillance.

More important, Jacobs's work at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and her background in comparative literature and media enables her to astutely interweave a variety of academic, news, and popular media sources into a larger narrative of how everyday people use pornography to define sexual identity as an extension of political rights in China. For researchers, Jacobs references important, rigorous social surveys about sexual behavior and attitudes, such as the China Health and Family Life Survey (Parish, Laumann, & Mojola, 2007), to contextualize her findings and arguments. She also includes traditional Chinese phrases in the body of the text to facilitate cross-cultural academic comprehension and reduce language barriers, helping researchers identify specific reports and government policy references. Furthermore, because savvy Internet users employ multiple variations of Chinese phrases to bypass censorship triggers, Jacobs's inclusion of the traditional Chinese characters demonstrates the innovative nature of sexual entertainment and political commentary deployed by average Internet users.

The book does have several significant weaknesses. First, the coverage of pornography and sexual entertainment is gendered and heteronormative. China benefits from a history of queerness and homosexuality, well reflected in its literature, cinema, and society at large (Sommer, 2000), but this diversity is sorely neglected in the scope of pornography and erotica discussed in *People's Pornography*. After reading the book, I was left wondering why there was minimal discussion about how technology impacts heterosexual women, gay men, lesbian women, or transgender individuals. Research on heterosexual behavior in China and Hong Kong has readily identified men and women who have multiple partners (Ho, 2006); can it be that these groups do not use virtual spaces and pornography to express themselves or create networks for sexual pleasure and entertainment? Or perhaps Jacobs has yet to address these "sexual deviants"? Also strangely absent from the cataloging of sexual entertainment are staples of deviant sexual expression, such as pornographic videos for downloading, S&M, bondage, fetishism, homosexuality, and swinging or multiple partners. Is it that people in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan do not participate in "sexual deviance" or is there stricter government surveillance of these activities?

This noticeable void about the Internet activities of sexual minorities makes Jacobs's chapter on "Queer Love" rather problematic. Her working definition of "queer" consists of lumping cross-dressing, cosplay, impersonation festivals, and transgender identities under the "queer" rubric. Thus her chapter title and definition of *queer* is misleading for Western researchers and audiences. This subject could have been handled in a more nuanced manner, with discussion about how

technology has allowed highly marginalized groups to express and connect in social spaces away from the purview of the state. This may be a reflection of the sensitive nature and taboo arena of homosexuality and transgender sexual identities in China. Unfortunately, the chapter conveys a campy tone about the performance of "queerness" via cross-dressing, impersonation, and variations of heteronormative "fake girls." Readers seeking a more nuanced discussion about homosexual culture could start with Vincent Gil's contribution, "The Cut Sleeve Revisited: A Brief Ethnographic Interview with a Male Homosexual in Mainland China."

Last, one of the issues hinted at in the text but not thematically addressed is that people on both sides of the censorship border in the greater China area consume a great deal of imported and international pornography—most notably in the forms of Japanese manga, anime, and adult sex videos, photos, and images through print, server exchange, and website media formats. Jacobs glosses over this somewhat but misses the opportunity to discuss how technology and the Internet facilitates the globalization of pornography. This component stands to offer valuable insights about how the processes of exoticization and eroticization occur within East Asian cultures.

While Jacobs accomplishes the great feat of documenting the breadth of sexual entertainment available to heterosexuals and how technology enables netizens to produce and disseminate soft-core pornography within and across censorship borders, the findings are contextualized with media theory as the main analytic framework. Readers looking for more refined sexuality theory and analysis or a wider array of sexualities and shifts of sexual behaviors would benefit from Elaine Jeffreys's edited volume *Sex and Sexuality in China* (2006), reviewed by Ruan (2007) in the *Journal of Sex Research*. Nonetheless, *People's Pornography* is a significant contribution to the study of sex and censorship in Asia. Jacobs situates social science research within popular media and news, making the text accessible and interesting to both a social science and a general audience. This book would be extremely useful in introductory courses about global sexualities as a primer about sexual behavior and heteronormative trends in East Asian settings at colleges and universities with an international focus or diverse student body.

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