

Impressions on the 7th IASSCS Conference – Hanoi, Vietnam, April 2009

*By Indira Maya Ganesh**

The first thing that occurred to me during the opening reception of the IASSCS conference was, 'wow, all these people like to talk about sexuality!' Attending the conference for the first time, this gave me a reassuring sense of community, and signalled the growth of this inter-disciplinary field.

Being particularly interested in the intersections of media, technology and sexuality I was looking forward to sessions that touched on these themes. The first plenary session squarely addressed the role of the media discourses around sexuality. Challenging, contentious but very welcome were the ideas that Josephine Ho raised with respect to digital media, censorship and sexuality. Using the conference themes of 'contested innocence' and 'sexual agency' as a backdrop, Ho spoke eloquently of how issues of child protection and the sexualization of children through (digital) media been constructed as such grave threats, that in the process diverse forms of sexual behaviour, spaces and relationships associated with these media forms, primarily the internet, are considered suspect or discredited. Sharing examples from around the world, Josephine Ho talked about how any content that linked children to sexuality is immediately considered inappropriate, often without any attention to the cultural and social contexts in which these are produced, discussed and accessed. In the process what constitute 'innocence', 'agency' and 'age-appropriateness' are assumed to be values to be preserved rather than issues to be debated. However content that could be violent or harmful towards women, for example, is rarely considered within similar parameters. So, insidious and convenient regimes of censorship have come to rule access to sexual content and spaces on the internet and in the media more generally. Another interesting issue Ho raised, and one that I feel requires far more research and investigation, that of 'sexual self-publication', the trend of publicizing one's sexuality through photos, videos and blogs; the discourses of gender and sexual subjectivity that women themselves generate through this are often absent in mainstream media discourses, with the issue of public sexual spectacle or scandal being foremost. What does this mean for younger women, particularly in the context of what may or may not be considered 'age appropriate' or 'innocent' – or even 'agency'? How do these spaces allow women (or other communities) to express themselves within a historical context of sexual silence and shame?

Considering that this conference was in Hanoi I looked forward to hearing about research and work across Asia. The idea of 'Asia' is in itself interesting, being so vast, diverse and in a sense, trans-national, that it sometimes becomes difficult to think of this continent as being unified in any specific way. However, new media environments have the potential to knit together disparate locations in fascinating

new ways, and I found myself wanting to learn more about the flows of sexualities and cultures across the region.

Many sessions I attended were highly localized descriptions of specific sexual practices, sub-cultures and spaces that are finding expression through the internet in particular. With an interest in Thailand and China, and considering that most of what I know of sexuality in these contexts has emerged from the management of the HIV epidemic or sexual/reproductive health programs, I was keen to hear about research on sexualities there. The emergence of queer and transgressive sexual cultures in these two countries is being well documented and I was drawn to a range of sessions, presenters and panels focusing on these two countries and cultures. In the context of the 'explosion' of a queer media-landscape in Bangkok particularly, Peter Jackson's work discussed the emergence of 'real' queer Bangkok-spatialities through the queer virtual/internet and other media like magazines, and consumer culture, and this led me to think about how queer movements in the region are similarly consumerized and what this means for the construction of sexuality, and for the politicization of sexuality when it becomes a range of products, styles, fashions, lifestyles that can be bought. Papers exploring sexual spaces in chat rooms (like in Thai 'camfrogs' or webcam rooms) talked about the emergence of queer sexualities online and raised vital methodological questions for research on, by and through the internet. Not only the validity and credibility of data becomes important but equally some reflection on the process of researchers being participants in their own research. I would have hoped for more critical interrogations of the sexualities emerging through camfrogs rather than descriptive accounts.

The China panels were also illuminating and I was impressed by the range of papers presented at the conference. The 2005 'SuperGirl' contest winner Li Yuchun and her potentially transgressive gender expression was the subject of some papers, and panels also considered the emergence of queered, consumer and media discourses of gender and sexuality. Coming from another equally teeming and vast culture, India, the similarities in the growth of media industries in appearing to foster 'alternate' discourses of sexuality was apparent. Eventually though, all these potentially transgressive moments are eventually embedded in, and reinforce mainstream heteronormativities. Considering that countries like China and India have large populations, the potential for a critical mass of subversions and transgressions through media that are harder to police, like mobile phones, is definitely worth exploring in the future.

Films by Cui Zi'en, Vagner de Almeida and Pedro Barbadillo/Carlos Ayuso screened at the conference were enjoyable and strong documents of sexual diversity, and hope. I enjoyed these and there can only be more such screenings at future conferences and sourced more widely from across the globe. If there was something left wanting at this conference, I believe it was the poorly curated arts and culture displays. I felt that the photography displays could have been far more professionally put together, and there were just two displays, both from

India. Is no one else in the world taking photographs or doing participatory media work? The displays would have distressed anyone who takes the art of photography seriously, not for their content necessarily, but for their organization, conceptualization and physical display itself. I think the display areas also need to be reconsidered in order to foster visibility, and to encourage more discussion. Also, there could also have been a greater diversity of professional and amateur performance art that explores themes of sexuality and culture, and entertains at the same time. Artistic discourses of sexuality are critical in representing diversity and nuance, saying the un-sayable, inspiring change and introducing whimsy and the unexpected in a context that tries to label, name and restrict by language. Doesn't the lived experience of our sexuality move us more than the languages of research and rights? I hope that future conference organizers spend more time conceptualizing these exhibits, perhaps by constituting a global panel of artists and activists who actually work with these media and art forms, and scouring the globe for more diverse and professional displays.

****Indira Maya Ganesh is an independent researcher from Bombay, India. Her poster "Secret Publics and Subversive Erotics in the Networked Society: A Bombay/Mumbai Story" was one of the awarded during the IASSCS Conference 2009.***