

Review

Katrien Jacobs, *People's Pornography: Sex and Surveillance on the Chinese Internet*, Bristol, Chicago: Intellect, 2012. ISBN 978-1-84150-493-3. 203 pp.

The World Wide Web and pornography have much common but perhaps the most obvious is their status as symbolic oxymoron - alternatively condemned and praised by different cultural groups, and according to diverse political agendas. While some hail the Internet as a powerful means of democratization and self-expression, others fear it could easily become just an efficient and pervasive tool for controlling the masses. Pornography is subject to similar ambivalence, being considered an empowering/liberating force or an objectifying/degrading agent of both women and men. This "inner dichotomy" characterizing both porn and netizenship seems to be taken to an extreme level in the context of Chinese society, and is the subject of Katrien Jacobs' latest book, *People's Pornography: Sex and Surveillance on the Chinese Internet*.

Through this innovative research project, Jacobs (an Associate Professor in Cultural Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong) continues the in-depth analysis of Internet sexual cultures initiated in her earlier book, *Netporn: DIY Web Culture and Sexual Politics* (2007) which examined the aesthetics and politics of DIY pornographies. This time she focuses attention on the circumscribed and relatively unexplored geo-political context of Hong Kong and Mainland China.

In *People's Pornography*, Jacobs investigates various aspects of the continuing processes of constructing sexual identities (as well as general redefinitions of sex, sexuality and personal freedom) in China at the beginning of the 21st century. To do so, she primarily focuses on recent developments in the production and consumption of DIY pornography in China rather than the circulation of "imported" images and models. In addition, she describes the most common "survival" practices enabling Chinese netizens to access (and exchange) censored materials and to express independent thinking, alongside consideration of the popular influence of dissident artists like Ai Wei Wei or nonconformist "celebrity bloggers" such as Han Han. Insight into actual (sexual) behaviours and (sexual) identity building processes is offered through the analysis of two distinct case studies: the race and gender dynamics operating among Hong Kong members of the sex dating website Adult Friend Finder, and the system of collective and individual identity strategies within Chinese cosplayers' communities.

As this brief summary of the book's contents indicates, many issues are at stake here, and an even broader range of topics and examples are developed in Jacobs' analysis. For me there are two recurring leitmotifs: first, the "inner dichotomy" concerning netizenship and porn. In Chapter 1, for instance, Jacobs outlines the specific controversies over consumption of pornography within Mainland China. According to two recent academic surveys and data collections (Wu et al. 2010; Parish et al. 2007), the recreational use of pornographic videos and writings is an established fact for Chinese men and (in much lower numbers) women, notwithstanding the strict policy of control and total censorship enacted by the Chinese Government against obscene images and adult content in general. The self-liberating potentials of this consumption seems to be partially tempered by the strongly normative nature of the materials chosen by Chinese consumers (most frequently illegal Japanese AV bootlegs and Chinese DIY videos). In fact, as Jacobs states: 'Even if sexually-explicit media are used and shared by netizens to defend civil liberties, the products themselves mostly reveal patriarchal fantasies, taboos, and frustrations' (p. 41). At the same time, as she demonstrates in Chapter 2, even Chinese people's net etiquette could reveal itself as extremely problematic and contradictory: together with a generalized claim for civil rights and freedom of speech (and also despite the tireless work of activist bloggers and sex bloggers), Chinese web users sometimes seem to have completely internalized a sort of "surveillance gaze". The Human Flesh Search Engine, for example, is a typically Chinese web phenomenon through which anonymous netizens 'work together, investigating people's personal details, stalking and spying on them, harassing them both in the virtual and physical world' (p. 79) to publicly "punish" suspected (sex) criminals. According to Jacobs' description, then, contemporary Chinese networked society seems to be characterized by a permanent (and quite inextricable) negotiation process between a widespread genuine struggle for "modernity" and (sexual) freedom, and a deeply rooted bond to a patriarchal and sex-phobic tradition of control over people's bodies and (sexual) behaviours.

This ambivalence is somehow emphasized by the (apparently) closed nature of the Chinese Internet, a sort of walled fortress, sometimes referred to as the "Innernet" (p. 46), in which access to different typologies of contents (from pornography to global social networks like Twitter) is strictly regulated by advanced surveillance systems, such as the infamous Great Fire Wall. It's no surprise, then, that Chinese netizens persistently look to foreign cultures to create their objects of desire and to build operational counterparts for self-definition. The constant gaze toward "the Other" is the second leitmotiv of the book. Western and (above all) Japanese cultural forms, models and representations are often invoked to shape Chinese tastes and identities. As described in Chapter 2, for instance, Chinese pornography fans worship Japanese AV stars (particularly Sola Aoi) as the perfect embodiment of the sexual object ("the pure girl") while often disdaining Chinese (sexy) digital celebrities, such as Sister Lotus and Sister Phoenix, even defining them as 'opportunistic media whores' (p. 74). Other examples can be seen in the sexualisation of race in the cybersex interplay between Asian women and Caucasian males (and, vice versa,

between Chinese males and Western women) on the Hong Kong version of Adult Friend Finder (Chapter 4); or in the “queer” (and sometimes problematic) re-appropriation of Japanese cosplay culture by the Chinese ACG fans, analysed in Chapter 5. In opposition to this trend, the work of Chinese female sex bloggers is determined to counter the Japanese sexual “colonialism”, as well as the Communist Party’s criminalization of non-standardized (sexual) lifestyles, as for example demonstrated by the work of February Girl, who has devoted her writing efforts to the rediscovery of Chinese erotic traditions (pp. 70-71).

These dynamics of control and freedom, as well as the reference to “external” (especially Japanese) modes of sexual representations, are also discussed in Jacobs’ analysis of the “gender variations” among Chinese porn audiences. In Chapter 3, she investigates the differences between fe/male uses of pornography and different (physical and emotional) responses to sexually explicit materials. Through a three stage interview process (anonymous fixed response internet questionnaire; 45-minutes interviews with sixty university students from Hong Kong and Mainland China; in-depth conversations with fifteen volunteers in front of their computers), Jacobs is able to deepen our knowledge of the rituals and modes of consumption of (Internet) porn in China, framing Chinese young adults’ relationship with explicit images in a context of ‘social rebellion and will to knowledge’ (p. 125). Moreover, in line with other audience research (Kipnis 1996, Chivers et al. 2004, Smith 2007), Jacobs corrects the ‘historical misconception that women have problems with sexual appetite and are uninterested in pornography’ (ibid) and demonstrates the ways in which Chinese young women interact with pornography as a means of constructing sexual subjectivity.

Throughout the book, Jacobs addresses and clarifies these (and other) issues and controversies, thanks to a remarkably deep knowledge of the cultural dynamics operating within Chinese society. Her research is based on a synergy of different methodologies drawn from the field of social sciences: content analysis of written, photographic and audio-visual texts; interviews with various individuals (other scholars, bloggers and artists); media ethnography, participant observation and auto-ethnography (intended as ‘an ethnography that can accommodate a deeper immersion and engaged performativity within different media environments’, as she states at p. 134). In particular, what I found extremely interesting methodologically is Jacobs’ emotionally charged scholarly approach: her deep personal involvement in the issues discussed, as well as her “immersive” participation with the target groups analysed, have certainly contributed to overcoming her racial and cultural “otherness” to Chinese culture, providing us with a ground-breaking insight into this quite “unfamiliar territory”.

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Biographical note:

Giovanna Maina obtained her Ph.D. in Visual Arts and Film Studies at the University of Pisa. She is author of several essays in anthologies as well as in national and international journals (*Cinéma & Cie: International Film Studies Journal*, *Comunicazioni Sociali*, *Bianco e Nero*). A member of the editorial staff of *Cinéma & Cie: International Film Studies Journal*, she has also edited *I film in tasca. Videofonino, cinema e televisione* (Felici 2009, with Maurizio Ambrosini and Elena Marcheschi) and *Il porno espanso. Dal cinema ai nuovi media* (Mimesis 2011, with Enrico Biasin and Federico Zecca). Since 2009 she is an organiser of the Porn Studies section of the Gorizia International Film Studies Spring School (University of Udine, Italy).

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