

# Utopian Identities, Real Selves

Whereas most of the voluminous critical discussion of 'postcolonialism' and literature has concentrated on issues of 'writing back' in colonial situations and in European languages to empires past and present, the focus of the IIAS workshop 'Chewing the West' was on indigenous literatures and the broader issue of the multiple ways in which not only Western literary genres, but also non-Western modern identities have been configured in literature outside the West.\*

Report >  
General

5-7 December 2002  
Leiden,  
the Netherlands

By Tony Day

The workshop's very conceptualization promised a shift from a narrow concern with the legacies of colonialism, which, as many commentators have observed, has tended to reinforce the very dominance of European languages and literatures that indigenous authors and post-colonial scholars are contesting. If the presenters effectively 'provincialized' and localized the dominant West, they also indicated that much remains to be done, through the study of literary forms themselves, before we understand how the worldwide processes of literary creation occur and lead to the emergence of 'world literature'. Particularly fascinating were the hints of a tension between utopian possibilities for identity conveyed through literary forms, whether 'Western' or 'indigenous', and the 'real' selves, whether in the guise of characters or authorial personae, conveyed by the literary text. The tension between idealized past or future identities and real selfhood in the present has less to do with the formation of the nation state than with the creation of literary selves. Readers around the world can recognize the latter in their own actual everyday, modern contexts (for several stimulating definitions of realism and the self in literature, see Karatani 1993, Makdisi 2000 and Zhao 1995).

Thus, according to Daniela Merolla (Leiden University), a real self emerges in modern Berber Kabyle literature that is distinct from those portrayed in either French ethnographic, Berber folkloric, or official (classical) Arabic linguistic terms. According to Thomas de Bruijn (Leiden University), Premchand's Hindi short story, *Kafan*, effectively presents India's economic and social realities in the 1930s not through Western techniques of narrative and psychological realism,

but by using older, indigenous rhetorical forms. Madhava and Ghisu acquire a selfhood which late-colonial Hindi readers could recognize as similar to their own through forms of characterization that derive from traditional ideas about possibilities for individuality and freedom. One such possibility occurs in the last stage of human existence, the 'sphere of renunciation', which is governed by the dominant emotional state (*rasa*) of 'the gruesome'. Another is embodied in the archetype of the saintly drunk. The self thus brought to life in the story is poised between the utopian promise of social customs and beliefs that offer an all-encompassing meaning to and release from life's suffering, and the paradoxical realization that, as Ghisu observes, 'someone who did not get a rag to cover her body when she was alive, needs a new shroud when she dies'. The story argues against any realistic hope of either a utopian modern future or a return to an idealized traditional past by means of a rhetoric saturated with Hindu religious idealism.

Merolla and De Bruijn, as well Kwadwo Osei-Nyame, Jr (University of London), Evan Mwangi (University of Nairobi), and Said A.M. Khamis (University of Bayreuth) in their essays on African literatures, do not present national identities as unitary but, rather, as multiple, layered, and gendered. The complex reality of war in Vietnam as portrayed in Duong Thu Huong's *Novel Without a Name* (1991) cannot be reduced to the heroic, ideal male stereotypes of Communist Party slogans, as Ursula Lies (University of Potsdam) demonstrates in her analysis. Yet that novel also conjures up a timeless, utopian kind of national identity that transcends the limits imposed by national boundaries, state doctrines, or gender differences. The role of the Sherlock Holmes-like detectives in the 1930s Sumatran novels discussed by Doris Jedamski (workshop convenor) is similarly utopian, not only as an idealized 'manifestation of modern rationality and subjectivity', as she puts it, or as a representation of the quintessential Javanese nobleman brought back to life in the late colonial Dutch East Indies, but also as an endorsement of a desired, future state of absolute law and order. As represented in the

Indonesian detective figure, the 'real' self is concealed behind the mysterious masks of a paternalistic superman who only ambiguously represents either the independent modern self or the national citizen. This is reminiscent of Franco Moretti's and Umberto Eco's claims that the detective fiction genre in the West negates individualism and freedom in the interest of promoting a paternalistic kind of social order (Moretti 1983; Eco 1979). As Moretti notes, detective fiction invokes science for defensive rather than developmental purposes, for it reinstates 'an idea of *status society* that is externalized, traditionalist, and easily controllable' (Moretti 1983: 145, italics in the original). The fetishist preoccupation with outward appearances and the hyperphysical details of the modernized colonial world, as noted by both Matthew Cohen (University of Glasgow) and Keith Foulcher (University of Sydney) in their papers on theatre and the novel in early twentieth-century Java respectively, may also convey a similarly ambiguous message: the tension between a 'real' national or modern self in the colonial present and a protean world of hypothetical, utopian identities without limit or possibility of attainment. ◀

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## Note >

\* Foulcher and Day, *Clearing a Space: Postcolonial Readings of Modern Indonesian Literature*, Leiden: KITLV Press (2002), p. 2, n.1

# Anthropological Futures

Report >  
Southeast Asia

27-28 November 2002  
Leiden,  
the Netherlands

Following 32 years of Suharto's New Order rule in Indonesia, the startling, occasionally marvellous, and all too often frightening developments of the last four years of Reformasi and its aftermath challenge us as scholars to consider the political-historical conjunctures in which we work and to think anew the ethnographic contexts of which we write. The nagging sense of crisis across the archipelago (with varied manifestations in different places), the recurrent political turmoil and communal violence, the novel experiments with democracy, civil institutions, and forms of publicity, the stubborn persistence of powerful forces opposed to change, the processes and by-products of decentralization, and, last but not least, the diverse negotiations by Indonesians of their positions within a post-9/11 global world order, all demand our urgent attention. The exploratory conference 'Anthropological futures for twenty-first-century Indonesia' was convened with these interrelated purposes in mind.

By Patricia Spyer

Among other issues raised, the conference convenor addressed the need for new research agendas that can better address the complex social dynamics and political processes characterizing Indonesia since Suharto's step-down. Are the same intellectual paradigms employed in research carried out under New Order conditions equally valid today, or did 'the appearance of order' – in John Pemberton's felicitous formulation (Pemberton 1994) – put in place by the Suharto regime cause us to look in some directions and not others? Has a new set of complex problems emerged which have only now become accessible?

Along with the refiguring of unfolding circumstances, the legacy of the Suharto era and, equally important, that

of the scholarship of the New Order can be explored from new perspectives. Amongst other issues, conference participants were invited to consider, in retrospect, the ramifications of legal restrictions and policies of the New

Order with respect to media and labour as well as the impact of the regime's cultural politics *vis-à-vis* religion, ethnicity, and gender. The bankruptcy of the former regime's historiography, the silences covering the massacres of

1965-66 and the New Order's human rights record, and the relative paucity of scholarship regarding Islam and the country's ethnic Chinese, seem especially worthy of reconsideration. Issues of globalization and the nation state's redeployment within an increasingly heterogeneous world are matters of concern together with, more specifically, current revisions of the nation state project and related issues of sovereignty, regional autonomy, and historical and political revisionisms. Amongst these more volatile issues, participants were asked to consider the kinds of imaginings, experiences, and ordinary and extraordinary events that have come to characterize the everyday across Indonesia since 1998.

Besides an afternoon of film-screenings by Garin Nugroho and Arjo Danusiri, introduced by the latter, an ethnographic filmmaker from Jakarta, the conference featured six speakers who engaged the issue of Indonesian and anthropological 'futures' in a range of compelling ways. Thinking about and imagining the future involved a detour through the past (Keane, Steedly), an engagement with the shifting temporalities woven through women's life cycles of work as well as with the subjective narrative of this variable experience (Saptari), a consideration of the conditions as well as possible outcomes to be pursued in the aftermath of violence (Laksono, Manuhutu), and the problem of 'making the future' through a process of 'decolonizing' the disavowed national historiography of the New Order (Henk Schulte Nordholt).

A focus of discussion was how thinking about the future necessarily implies a vantage point with respect to which not only the future – or a range of possible or alternative futures – come into view but also particular perspectives on the present and past as well. Imagining the future, in Indonesia – as elsewhere – means being cognizant of the possibilities alive at any given moment, compels the exploration of the different temporalities and positions that people

## Two films

were screened at the conference. *Maiden of the Morning Star*, an episode on Papua from the TV docudrama series *Library of the Children of the Archipelago*, focuses on expectations for the future in this frontier of the Indonesia nation state as seen through the eyes of a young Papuan schoolgirl. *Viva Indonesia: Letters to God*, a compilation of four produced as part of the 'Visual House of Papua' project, addresses the pervasive Indonesian stereotyping of Papuans, ethnic tensions, local ambitions of independence, and the Indonesian school curriculum, specifically the teaching of national history. The film features five children across the archipelago who, confronted with crisis in their post-New Order lives, each write to God asking him to intervene in their own particular troubling circumstances.

Presentations were given by Webb Keane, P.M. Laksono, Wim Manuhutu, Ratna Saptari, Henk Schulte Nordholt, and Mary Steedly. Discussants were Kees van Dijk, Frans Hüsken, Nico Schulte Nordholt, Fridus Steijlen, Heather Sutherland, and Leontine Visser. The CNWS Research School and the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences at Leiden University, the KITLV Vereniging, IIAS, the Royal Dutch Academy funded project 'Indonesian Mediations,' the National Museum of Ethnology, and WOTRO/NWO all provided valuable conference support.

# Gay Literature from China: In Search of a Happy Ending

Research >  
China

Gay literature in the People's Republic of China (PRC) is still 'underground', but it reflects the growing self-awareness of a subculture. What lies ahead? The texts themselves – some have already been made into films – provide no easy answer. Be that as it may, Chinese gay literature is thriving.

By Remy Cristini

In December of 2001, the Film Association at Beijing University organized 'China's First Gay Film Festival'. Posters went up on campus, but most of the advertising for the event was done on the university's homepage. Chinese and foreign gay films were to be shown at different locations on and around the campus for ten days. Students sold tickets in their dormitories. The major attraction was *Lanyu*, by Hong Kong film director Stanley Kwan, recently released in Hong Kong and Taiwan and boasting five Golden Horse Awards (the 'Taiwanese Oscars'). Before long, all tickets for all screenings of *Lanyu* were sold out.

The fact that PRC students were allowed to organize an event like this is remarkable in itself, as none of the other movies on the programme had ever had a public screening before. On top of that, a lot of discussion had been going on about *Lanyu* because the film had been shot in Beijing without first consulting Chinese authorities, which would normally make permission for its distribution or public screening extremely unlikely. The fact that this festival has taken place, with permission of university officials, might be an indication that the official attitude towards homosexuality within

may inhabit at different points in their lives, and an engagement with their own imaginings and narratives of these processes. If this conference did not plot the anthropological futures for twenty-first-century Indonesia (which was hardly its intent) it did bring home the importance of attending to the specificities of particular historical and political junctures imagined and conceived in some sense as 'beginnings.' For scholars of Indonesia, this may be the real challenge of the moment: to track the complex processes through which the wide range of possibilities attendant on 'beginnings' such as national independence or Reformasi are subsequently narrowed down with some options foreclosed while others remain to guide the making of new Indonesian futures, presents, and pasts. <

## Reference

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Chinese society is changing. In itself, the plot of *Lanyu* is not shocking. It is the tragic love story of a poor student (Lanyu) and a wealthy businessman (Handong). Lanyu is a country boy who goes to university in Beijing. When he becomes short of money, his only way out is to prostitute himself. Handong is his first customer and also the first person with whom he has sex. Lanyu falls in love with Handong who takes good care of the young student, but although Handong shows affection in a material way, he does not allow himself to get emotionally involved. He hurts Lanyu badly by having sexual relationships with other boys as well, and nearly breaks his heart when he announces that he is to marry a lady from the office. After a lot of dramatic twists and turns, Handong finally acknowledges that he is gay and truly in love with Lanyu. Just when they seem to have overcome all difficulties and can be together at last, Lanyu dies in a car accident.

The movie *Lanyu* is based on a Chinese gay novel, *A Story From Beijing*, which has circulated on the web since 1996. For the film, the plot was not really altered, but the original text is full of explicit lovemaking scenes, pornographic rather than erotic. When the story first appeared on the web, it was truly shocking. Up until the early

1990s, gay men in Beijing had little choice but to hang around in parks to meet other gay men, and when they made love it was often in a public toilet. Though it may have been quite common in pre-modern China, prostitution, especially gay prostitution, has been officially designated as a vice from feudal times by the Communist Party, and in the 1980s (when the story of Lanyu and Handong begins) police would occasionally arrest gay men to maintain 'public order'. When in the 1990s people gained access to the Internet, this immediately became an alternative to the parks and toilets, and provided the gay population with a more secure meeting place, mostly beyond the control of law enforcement. *A Story From Beijing* was probably the first of its kind and is the best-known and most influential gay novel to date. Its socially controversial theme aside, *A Story From Beijing* is provocative in other respects as well: it contains pornography, prostitution, and a reference to the violent ending of the student demonstrations around Tiananmen Square in 1989. Protected by relative anonymity, made possible by the Internet, the author of *A Story From Beijing* – his or her identity remains unknown – paved the way to a genre known as 'Tongzhi (Comrade) Literature'. The word 'Comrade', widely used in communist discourse, literally means 'of the same intent' and was adopted in Chinese gay circles as a form of address. Though it was used ironically at first, it has now become a common word for 'gay', without any communist connotation.

## Voices of comrades

One characteristic of the early Comrade novels is that they all tend to be rather unlikely love stories, very touching (or sentimental) at times, but invariably leading to catastrophic endings: the lovers are either separated by death or struck down by other cruel

Zheping is one of the author's close friends. Usually wearing women's clothes, he runs a small boutique in a Beijing department store.



Courtesy of Zheping

tricks of fate. Nevertheless, these stories depict an imaginary and often idealized world, a refuge from harsh reality, which would appeal to gay readers, especially young people with access to the Internet. Some of the early novels have become real Comrade classics. Though not very realistic, the stories do represent the lives of other gay people, and let readers imagine what it might be like to live openly as a gay instead of having to hide one's sexual preference. It is safe to say that the communicative function of Comrade novels has always been more important than their aesthetic aspects. Even an influential piece like *A Story From Beijing* shows little formal sophistication. This is partly explained by the nature of the media through which these stories circulate: the Internet. Anybody can publish anything on the Internet – and that is basically what happens. There are a lot of websites with gay discussion forums (even the homepage of Beijing University has its own!) and chat rooms.<sup>1</sup> Most of the novels start as feuilletons on one of these sites, with new chapters added every day, readers commenting on the story as it is being written. When a story becomes truly popular, it will end up on other sites that collect Comrade novels.<sup>2</sup>

Over the past few years, the stories have gradually become more realistic. Instead of just telling the story of two people who seem to live entirely in their own world, recent novels describe the lives of gay people in a world that is predominantly shaped by heterosexual vision. Stories about university life on campus are popular, because most of today's readers and authors are either students themselves or belong to the same age group. The stories feature issues such as coming out and the difficulty of finding a partner. In recent Comrade novels there is also room for subplots unrelated to homosexuality, and some authors pay more attention to form and style. As a result, pornography is completely absent in recent novels. Another important development is that the stories no longer necessarily end in misery, although the characters' future often remains uncertain.

## Subculture and society

An important reason for these changes is that Chinese society has also changed a lot in the past ten years. After several decades of poverty and frugality, consumerism as a result of economic development now goes hand in hand with rapidly spreading individualism in urban China. Wearing trendy clothes and armed with fancy phones, young city people flamboyantly express their identities. This has led to increased diversification in art and literature, whereas until the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), state-enforced uniformity was the rule. Nowadays, gay people in the cities no longer need to hide in the dark, and

they go out in bars and clubs that are commonly known as gay places. It is not unusual to see elderly people sit down in front of a disco for a rest on their evening stroll, watching the colourful transvestites as they emerge from a taxi and make their way to the entrance. In this respect, the generation gap in China is huge and mutual understanding nearly impossible, but for many young people the 'live and let live' strategy is working well – for the time being.

The main problem that remains for Chinese homosexuals is traditional thinking about marriage and posterity. Young gay people are often forced into heterosexual marriage by their family. However, in recent years they have been getting support from Chinese scholars and scientists. More and more sociologists and psychologists are educating the public by stressing that homosexuality is not a disorder but a natural phenomenon, that forced marriage is harmful to all parties involved, and that denying the existence of a gay population will be harmful to society as a whole at a time when the AIDS epidemic is spreading in China. They advocate greater tolerance for and better understanding of homosexuality, to enable a fruitful debate on public health.

## A happy ending?

Whether or not homosexuals will become an acknowledged part of Chinese society in the near future remains to be seen, and the prospects for today's young gay people are as open-ended as their stories. Up until a few years ago, authors of Comrade novels saw no future for gay couples in China and they let their heroes die an early death to spare them a destiny that would perhaps be even more painful. Today, their prospects seem less grim, both in the stories and in real life.

Needless to say, the film festival at Beijing University was a great success. Perhaps it was sheer chauvinism that led to the university officials' decision to allow the festival to go ahead, as *Lanyu* was, after all, shot in Beijing with PRC actors and was based on a Chinese novel. Journalists present at the premiere of *Lanyu* praised the film and the initiative of the students in local newspapers. Although the university officials were also the ones who ordered the students to terminate the festival prematurely, because of this unforeseen media attention, the event was a signal of change. One of the outcomes is that gay films are now for sale in the innumerable VCD shops throughout the country and it is only a matter of time before the first Comrade novel will appear in bookshops. <

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## Notes >

- 1 <http://bbs.beida-online.com/bbsWeb/list.php?board=Homo>
- 2 e.g. [www.boosky.net/wencai/jingxuan](http://www.boosky.net/wencai/jingxuan)