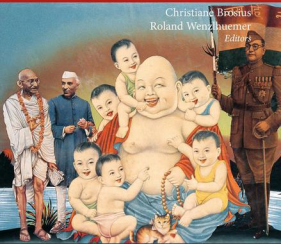# Transcultural Turbulences

Towards a Multi-Sited Reading of Image Flows

Christiane Brosius
Roland Wenzlhuemer

Editors

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Part I
Introduction

Chapter 1
Introduction – Transcultural Turbulences: Towards a Multi-sited Reading of Image Flows

Christiane Brosius and Roland Wenzlhuemer

"(T)ransculture – the violent collision of an extant culture with a new or different culture that reshapes both into a hybrid transculture that is itself then subject to transculturation – highlights those places where the carefully defined borders of identity become confused and overlapping, a task that requires new histories, new ideas and new means of representation" (Nicholas Mirzoeff 2002 (1998): 477)

Fig. 1.1 Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose with the INA flag and a Laughing Buddha surrounded by little children. The Osian's Archive & Library Collection, India. Lithographic cut-out pasted on handpainted paper backdrop. Year unknown, c. 1940s–50s

What's in an Image?

This volume springs from the international conference on 'Flows of Images and Media' hosted by the Cluster of Excellence 'Asia and Europe in a Global Context: Shifting Asymmetries in Cultural Flows' in October 2009 at Heidelberg University.[1] The conference poster and flyer featured a remarkable print displaying an unusual assembly: a big, fat, laughing Buddha sits in the middle; six Chinese babies are climbing all over him, as if he were a mountain, and pinch, caress and tease him in a loving manner; a cat, as if escaped from a Victorian children's picture book, sits at the Buddha's feet; the Buddha is framed by three Indians, all of whom were prominent leaders of the independence struggle against British colonial rule; from left to right Mohandas K. Gandhi, then Jawaharlal Nehru, and standing alone on the right side is Subhas Chandra Bose, holding the Indian flag that reads, in Devanagari script, 'Jay Hind' (Hail to Hind/ustan). The composition of the ten figures (plus cat) is reminiscent of a group photograph: they seem to have posed for the camera, looking into the apparatus or talking to each other, posing in front of a studio backdrop that depicts a lake and triangular mountains. The tactile closeness of the Chinese figures derives from their voluptuous white, round bodies. They are scarcely clad, a matter that becomes even more evident when compared to the political leaders, all of whom are dressed in their 'typical' outfits: Gandhi in his famous, self-made loincloth; Nehru in his elegant frock coat and narrow trousers, and Bose in the olive-green uniform of the Indian National Army.[2]

Many of the conference participants thought that the print had been 'photoshopped' especially for the occasion. To us, this assumption was food for thought in terms of reflecting further on codes and ways of seeing and perceiving something as 'made up', 'authentic' and 'appropriate'. Why were beholders of the image wary of an intentionality that went beyond the temporal and spatial frame of the conference? For one, perhaps because we have a group of bodies which, ethnically speaking, are distinctly different (Indian and Chinese), and rarely seen assembled in such a transnational and transcultural combination. Secondly, the image's genre is the collage: the two ethnic 'entities' are cut and pasted together without considering aesthetic differences (hand-tinted photographs versus the sketch of a porcelain figure) or the compatibility of sizes.

We took this collage as an opportunity to trace the transcultural flows that can become visible in an image. If we apply Mirzoeff's above definition of transculturation and project it onto this condensed space of overlapping levels of visuality, we must address the new histories, ideas and means of representation that may have contributed to this print. Since very little is known about the image's provenance – not even the place of production is known – and considering the fact that it was created probably sometime in the 1940s, we can only draw attention to questions that concern our understanding of the transcultural flow,

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[1]See http://www.asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de/en/news-events/news/detail/m/annual-conference-2009-flows-of-images-and-media.html, accessed on 12.6.2010.

[2]All three figures represent different shades of struggle against British colonial rule, ranging from non-violence to the formation of an unofficial army.

and the entanglements of images and media between and within Europe and Asia
that inform this image. This is precisely what the authors in this volume attempt to
do in their individual case studies.

The image of the Buddha, children, cat and Indian leaders was discovered by
Patricia Uberoi, sociologist and scholar of gender and popular visual culture, in the
Osian's Archive in Mumbai.[3] It is one of the many anonymous and marginalised
products of Indian mass-produced print culture that, over the last decade, has
enjoyed increasing popularity among collectors and scholars, thus telling of a
growing trend to attribute 'genuine' and indigenous value as opposed to the status
of 'low class' and 'cheap' kitsch to local and yet global imaginaries. Uberoi's
specific find beckons questions about the entanglement of the print's 'Chinese' and
'Indian' elements, and confronts us with the concern that is central to our explora-
tion of flows of images and media: how can we trace an image's 'social life'
(Appadurai 1986)? Can we trace it back to an 'origin' in time and space, and if
so: what surplus value would we have if we did, especially in the light of a growing
tendency in the humanities to abandon the proclamation of, and desire for, 'one
origin', 'authenticity' and 'teleological genealogy'?

Our entry image and the primary material of the articles assembled in this
volume demand that we deliberate on a host of different flows and entanglements:
The flows of ideas and concepts, in this case of national identity, sovereignty and
citizenship, that are at play between Europe and Asia, as well as within Asia, and
that cut across the (Eurocentric) divide between the religious and political domains.
Moreover, we must consider images and media as part of and signifiers of flows of
production and markets. Again, with our entry image at the back of our mind, it
would be interesting to know more about the production background and potential
audiences and publics intended to be created or/and reached by a certain medium.
For example, when our image was made, i.e. in the first half of the twentieth
century, Chinese printing presses dominated the market – much like today – and
thus generated flows of media and images that circulated in and through hitherto
little-known territories and publics.[4] Furthermore, there is not just one mediascape
(Appadurai 1996), but there are flows of different media technologies and genres
that contribute to speeding up, or complicating the movement of images across
space, time and audiences. Sometimes, these scapes cross and spill into each other;
sometimes they compete and exclude each other, generating different kinds of
entanglements and separations. This multi-media landscape cannot not be

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[3]Osian's is an institution founded in 2000, dedicated to collecting, studying and selling Indian art,
both 'fine' art and 'popular' or 'folk' art, predominantly from the nineteenth and twentieth
centuries (see http://www.osians.com/, accessed on 6.6.2010). It is best known for its role as an
auction house.

[4]The ecologies of technological exchange and use are sadly understudied in terms of the circula-
tion of printing presses: prints were not only produced in China and India, but also in Germany (see
Jain 2004), even though India had had its own printing presses since the arrival of the Jesuits in
South India (see Babb and Wadley 1995).

understood without considering the concept of intermediality, which means forwarding the idea of intertextuality. There is a constant and dynamic cross-referencing within and between media domain/s and genres. Thus, if we look at one particular medium and how it enriches and thickens, or, conversely, decreases and slows down the 'meaning' and speed of an image in a particular time, space and circuit, we ought to be able to relate this to other media genres, such as painting, film or photo-studio iconography, or to the realm of material or digital culture. Intervisuality, too, as a concept and practice of cross-referencing and mutually citing images (so for example as to look familiar, or different to a referent), underlines the attempt to grasp transculturality from different angles, urges us to take up different positions as we look at an image and try to understand its itinerary. The concepts of intervisuality or interocularity[5] are relevant to explore the interdependence and different fabric of sites and modes of seeing within different media (Ramaswamy 2003: XVI). They are thus key to our understanding of transculturality as a zone and process of highly asymmetrical entanglements. Finally, flows of symbolic meaning, performativity and aesthetic experience require consideration. The symbolic meaning of this particular Buddha as pointing towards a prosperous and harmonious future shifts in combination with the Indian Independence leaders. Sandwiched between the stoic and skinny figures of the Freedom Movement, where no similar Buddhist iconography exists and Buddhism is not associated with national identity, the Chinese Buddha's return to his 'homeland' and his fusion with the narrative of national independence leaves much space for further exploration.[6] A corporeal quality emerges from the combination of different physical appearances in the image, based on the almost diametrically opposite physicality of the figures and genres that the image hinges on. There is, for instance, the symbol of spirituality versus the historical figures of Nehru, Gandhi and Bose; there is the ascetic aloofness of the latter versus the tangible one of the Buddha. The spiritual symbolism and voluptuous corporeality of the Buddha and the children – referring to wealth and prosperity – address the beholder with a different tactility than the ascetic corporeality of the Indian figures. The latter suggests rather a withdrawal of figure and beholder through the veil of political iconography.[7] All this points us to the recognition of multiple performative levels at work in an image like the one discussed here, connected or untied, encoded/decoded (Hall 1997) in the process of looking at or remembering an image. It further relates us to what Christopher Pinney and others have coined as the poetic work of 'performative

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[5]Intervisuality stands for the cross-referencing of visual codes of representation, for multiple viewpoints, sometimes even embedded in one beholder (Mirzoeff 2000). Interocularity attributes relevance to the embraidedness of ways of seeing while gazing at an image or object. The latter concept underlines the agency of the beholder (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1992).

[6]In a political context, the Buddha is usually associated with the Dalit Movement against the dogma of 'Untouchability', and heralded mass conversion of low-caste members to Buddhism under the leadership of BR Ambedkar in the 1940s.

[7]Thanks to Rudolf Wagner for further stimulating this particular thought process.

productivity', both in the image and the beholder (Pinney 2001: 169). The meaning attributed to an image changes constantly, depending on its itinerary, locale, time and audience of consumption.

Our Buddha image forces us to consider questions of cultural translation and speaking in tongues. In our disciplines' desire for overlapping cultural and regional mappings, we seem illiterate when it comes to 'reading' its inner-Asian, entangled 'texts' and contexts. Despite the puzzles of production, circulation and 'intentionality' surrounding this image, it is a visual stepping stone to invite discussions around newly emerging and challenging concepts in the humanities: transculturality and the cultural flows and asymmetries connected with it. Our key image also throws light on another level of inquiry: the study of the making, unmaking, and fabric of public spheres. Examining the transcultural entanglements of images, sounds, media and concepts, as well as the actors involved in creating, perpetuating or obstructing them, helps us to better understand the qualitative shifts in public (and private) spheres at different moments of historical and regional significance. We argue that presupposing the existence of multiple public spheres helps us to promote the idea of 'entangled publics' that stimulate each other by generating contested or consensual concepts and meanings. One of the competencies required to trace – and understand – the itinerary of images and media – would be to adopt George Marcus' concept of multi-sited ethnography as a crucial method for understanding globalisation as practice (1995). This suggests an approach toward translation based on multi-perspectival and multi-sited ways of looking that also imbue the history of seeing, image-production and circulation.[8] We are grateful that many of our colleagues at the Karl Jaspers Centre for Transcultural Studies have helped us to embark on the process of a 'thick description' of an image, its routes and roots (Geertz 1973; Clifford 1997).[9] From the perspective of Monica Juneja, who holds the Cluster's Chair of Global Art History, the image stirs the beholder's curiosity because it addresses him/her with a codified repertoire that has not been seen in synergy before. It juxtaposes different kinds of visualities and ways of seeing. Inserting a laughing Buddha, who symbolizes wealth and fertility, into a space of political iconography – of national struggle for independence – seems strange, almost surreal, to those trained in western logic and gazing. The Cluster Professor of Buddhist Studies, Birgit Kellner, associated the figure of Maitreya, the coming Buddha who fosters tolerance, generosity and contentment, with the fact that fighting for freedom requires a utopian goal and particular desires such as abundance, fertility, health and energy. Yet, he is framed by a representative of non-violence and by a figure who does not object to the use of violence for the sake of national

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[8]Sarat Maharaj (2004) used the term 'twittered gaze' to point to the highly decentralized and fragmented ways of looking across vast areas of image and media production and circulation, yet not in terms of a panoramic but a consciously incomplete, multi-sited and interrupted activity.

[9]Thick description is a term coined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) who considered it to be a method by which a case could be explored from as many perspectives and contextual levels of meaning as possible, as in an archaeological excavation.