

Editor's Note

This issue of *Transcultural Studies* features four contributions, each of which investigates a problem of transcultural mobility from a specific disciplinary perspective. The essays span a time period ranging from the second millennium BCE to the late twentieth century and each of them examines negotiations with difference, the agency of individuals and groups, and the pull of locations. The authors bring back center-stage materials that often fall through the gaps which individual disciplinary canons and their frameworks tend to produce. A transcultural enquiry on the other hand enables and necessitates the recuperation of such sources.

The issue opens with Lai Yu-chih's study of the production of texts and images at the Qing court in the eighteenth century about the cassowary, an exotic bird widely represented in Europe and often strongly associated with royalty. The author closely investigates the processes of selection, translation, and stylistic appropriation of accounts and images of the cassowary from a wide range of European texts—above all the French anatomical report by Charles Perrault dating to the late seventeenth century—and the insertion of reconfigured productions in existing local genres, to draw out the role of agency and interpretation as these played out between the Qianlong emperor, his court artists (which included members of the Jesuit mission to the Qing court), and the sources from which they chose their objects. The emulation of mimetic, ostensibly “scientific” visual modes by Chinese court artists involved redeploying their expressive potential to construct knowledge of another kind—divine endorsement of imperial rule. The intersection between visual knowledge of natural history and narratives of universal rulership continues to be a relatively neglected theme in the study of early modern court cultures. While historians have tended to read ideologies of rulership through the prism of textual sources, art historians have not paid sufficient attention to the genre of nature studies. Ongoing research on empires in other regions of Asia suggests that compiling and producing knowledge of natural history from an array of circulating materials as a way to realize imperial ideals might be a shared feature among early modern monarchies across a vast Eurasian zone, a hypothesis that invites further, ideally collaborative, research.

That transcultural interaction with migrating knowledge can never be a matter of passive reception, is one of the main insights to be gained from the article by Okubo Takeharu, which looks at the appropriation of Dutch academic jurisprudence and political economy in Japan during the later Meiji period. Japanese encounters with and translations of materials of European

provenance up to the mid-nineteenth century were mediated through Dutch sources, a circumstance that for a long time came to serve as a shorthand for the diffusion of “Western” knowledge in Japan. Okubo’s investigation of the political thought of Ono Ozusa, a commentator of Dutch jurisprudence who drafted a proposal of Japan’s future constitution, draws out the complex dynamics of this process which was far from being a simple assimilation of some pre-formed “Western” notions. Ono had to negotiate between, on the one hand, the historical idiom of his Dutch sources—already transcultured through their absorption of Roman law studies—, and on the other the fashionable Benthamite utilitarian science of the legislator. There was no single “West” to which Ono Azusa looked; instead he made his way through divided, often irreconcilable views as to what constituted and sustained the modernity of European societies and polities.

Both articles, by Lai and Okubo, have been translated from Chinese and Japanese as part of our journal’s continuing endeavor to act as a forum for bringing to an anglophone readership the fruits of scholarship in other languages. Such an engagement aims at more than a simple overcoming of linguistic hurdles: the goal is the reception of scholarship at a global level. Translation, as in both these cases, has been undertaken as a dialogical exercise between author and translator; it involves interaction with the concerns and framing positions of a different academic culture, which is in itself a transcultural process. Okubo Takehara, for instance, belongs to a younger generation of Japanese scholars, who have begun to unpack the role of the Dutch VOC in the transmission of knowledge to Japan in what still remains an “inner-Japanese” discussion.

The article by Diamantis Panagiotopoulos sets out to examine certain key terms used in descriptions of transcultural mobility—terms such as import, exotic, rare, precious, or foreign—from within the context of the meanings ascribed to them in societies of the Eastern Mediterranean centuries before the advent of modern globalization. Using the materiality of objects as a prism, the article argues for a contextual definition of concepts drawn from local practices wherein the main factor determining the otherness of an object was the degree to which its material resisted domestication, while design, style and function could lose their distinctiveness once incorporated within new contexts. The article makes a strong argument for a more dynamic framework which negotiates the distance between local perceptions and modern disciplinary parameters.

Objects figure centrally also in Barbara Mittler’s contribution, which is part of the series offered to felicitate the journal’s editor Rudolf Wagner. The article takes a fresh look at narratives of China’s Cultural Revolution which

highlight its iconoclasm or forcible confiscation of material objects, especially printed books. Instead the paper argues—on the basis of evidence collected through extensive field-work—for a transformation or re-appropriation of the experience of “smashing” to constitute a new, transculturally shaped culture of consumption.

We hope this issue of the journal makes for stimulating reading. We look forward to your feedback and contributions to strengthening the journal’s role as a forum for interdisciplinary conversations and innovative research.

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