

## *Editor's Note*

On July 14, 2012, Heidelberg's Cluster of Excellence "Asia and Europe in a Global Context: Shifting Asymmetries in Cultural Flows" received the good news that its funding will be extended for another five years. That the focus for this second round will be broader becomes apparent in the Cluster's new subtitle "The Dynamics of Transculturality," which shows that it intends to test the bold hypothesis that "transcultural interaction is the lifeline of all culture." If proven, this would herald a dramatic shift in the basic approach to the study of culture and necessitate developing the appropriate methodologies, reorganizing institutional structures, and procuring the resources needed for this type of research.

Our journal will continue its efforts to serve as a critical platform where scholars from all over the world—including, of course, the Heidelberg's Cluster, which itself is an enterprise where scholars from many countries work—can address the daunting challenges confronting transcultural research.

Among these challenges is the management of a journal such as *Transcultural Studies*. It is not a venue that adds another voice to a chorus of outlets in an established academic field. Instead, the journal sets out to facilitate the exploration of a still evolving approach that focuses on the interaction between, rather than the action within, national, language, or media borders. Hence, the editorial work goes beyond checking the general fit of a submission for the journal, securing an appropriate peer-review, and then gently (or not so gently) prodding the author to deliver on time for the next issue. In a new approach with vast applicability, as is the case with transcultural studies, finding qualified and willing reviewers is a difficult task, and the editors themselves often take on the role of intellectual sparring partners to help authors bring out the full potential of their arguments.

To broaden the scholarly base on which this editorial work must needs rest, the Cluster's Steering Committee has asked Monica Juneja to step in as co-editor. She is a professor of Global Art History, and readers will be familiar with her work from earlier issues where she introduced and jointly edited the series on multi-centred modernisms. She has been a mainstay of support in building this journal, which her new role as co-editor now formally reflects. At the same time, her joining the principal editorship is also intended to signal the importance that Transcultural Studies attaches to media other than text.

We are also happy to welcome Antje Fluechter as a new member of our Editorial Board. She is a historian whose work focuses on concepts of state and administration. Her research investigates the way reports about state organization in India and China have enriched the arsenal of reform ideas in northern Europe

since the opening of the sea routes. Despite being in the midst of finalizing her habilitation thesis, she continuously supported the journal's editorial work and we are confident that she will be able to also attract further contributions from scholars with a European focus. One member of the Editorial Board, Harald Fuess, decided to shift his attention to the management of the Cluster's MA and doctoral program. We thank him for his contributions.

With its three articles and enhanced podcast, the new issue continues our exploration of different formats to present transcultural research. The speaker in the podcast is Neil MacGregor, the director of the British Museum. His widely and enthusiastically reviewed book *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, which was part of a multimedia project by accompanying a BBC TV series of 100 installments, has substantiated the "history" in the title by tracing the way certain objects have travelled into different contexts, or how they absorbed features from objects that came from elsewhere. His opening talk at the Cluster's annual conference in October 2012, on which this podcast is based, probes two key questions of transcultural research: what happened to an object as a carrier of meaning once it was inserted into a different, unfamiliar context, and how are migrating objects from elsewhere reinvented and claimed as "authentic" markers of the national and cultural identity in their new homes.

The essays by Huang Xuelei and Petra Thiel, which comprise the second and last part of the themed section "The Transcultural Travels of Trends," also take on the question of what happens to objects that are removed from their erstwhile cultural context. However, both authors focus less on the stark differences between meaning that cultural features and goods acquire on their trajectories, but on transculturally shared sensibilities and markets that form around, for example, migrating plot lines of sentimental stories (Huang), or challenging character features of fictional child protagonists (Thiel). Both studies highlight the role of local agency (or the lack of it) in this process, which involves a certain adjustment to local conditions, yet we are reminded of the fact that the modern world has developed a much larger homogeneity in tastes and preferences among literate urbanites, which in turn allows for a spectacular increase in the migration of cultural items as well as their spread through the variety of modern media. The studies thus open the door to the wider question about the historicity of transcultural interaction as well as the change in the dynamics of this interaction in accordance with changing historical circumstances.

Both studies also present substantial empirical evidence to caution against a reductionist approach wherein transcultural interaction is treated as a dependent variable of power relations (and their asymmetries). Instead, instances of refusal or partial appropriation of travelling cultural goods, which follow a trajectory independent of overarching structures of power, urge us to find explanatory arguments that account for often less predictable modes of reception within new local contexts. Why should a Swedish children's book about Pippi Longstocking,

which many Swedish publishers had declined to publish because they considered it to be too risky, embark on a world career, while a story about the Monkey King Sun Wukong from the wonderful Chinese novel *Journey to the West*, which was distributed as part of a very official and richly funded PRC government effort to reach foreign audiences with cultural products from China, never made it outside of China? Why should an English sentimental novel as well as another English novel that copied its plot line be widely translated and resurface as very successful film scripts, one for a Hollywood producer, the other for a Chinese producer? Why would the latter's film then trigger another, very popular Chinese film written by a woman of Polish origin, who had married a Chinese man in Paris. She also wrote a novel along the same plot line, but why would her prose version be consequently used in Canton for a Chinese film with the great star Ruan Lingyu in the female lead-role? The documentation and analysis offered by these studies challenge us to find adequate ways of theorizing agency within transcultural encounters.

Subrata Mitra explores the dynamics of the interaction between post-colonial national governments with a strong commitment to maintain the unity of the "national" realm inherited from the colonial power, and sub-national movements who vie for greater autonomy or even independence and mobilize resentments by regional groups against their marginalization. A traditional political science approach might describe the challenge of sub-national movements in terms of efforts by status- and benefit-seeking elites to capitalize on a subliminal resentment against preferred treatment of other groups and regions by the central government and then develop a model delineating the stages of the conflict. The author refines this model by adding history and culture as relevant resources for sub-national mobilization, and presenting the claims to secular modernity as one used primarily by the central government. He points out that both these tactics have seen many uses in India and elsewhere and all participants in the described conflict are aware of this fact. This directs us to further issues that merit investigation: What was the process in which these resources of legitimacy gained international standing and acceptance; what are their sources of authority; what were the channels (if any) through which both sides became familiar with this resource; what use did they make of them in their public presentation, and how did their strategies interact with other instances where these resources had been used in similar political contestations?

Different academic disciplines will open their own paths to engage with the challenge of transculturality. For any field focused on conflict and its management, an understanding of transculturality as unstructured interaction must be an idealistic anathema that fails to account for the very real presence of political confrontations, which is often undergirded by cultural claims. The explicit uneasiness of Subrata Mitra's paper with such an understanding shows how much work has yet to be done before a broader and sustainable understanding of transculturality is reached.

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