

**“Spectacle & Sovereignty: Stately Bodies on Display”
Stanford Humanities Center, January 23-24, 2015**

This workshop focuses on the politics, aesthetics, and ethics of masculinity/femininity in the making of iconic wo/men who have become globally recognizable (some of them under the sign of “father/mother of the nation”). The modern era has produced all manner of male protagonists who at various times have served as the progenitors of the polities in whose very names they subsequently act and speak. Even as we ask why the “mother of the nation” is typically an abstraction while founding fathers are flesh-and-blood men, we are interested in considering how these flesh-and-blood men have been transformed into hyper-visible symbols forms that come to dominate public spaces and places. We are particularly interested in tracking the role of literary/visual imagery and media events in the production of such fatherly/motherly bodies which, following the work of Bishnupriya Ghosh, we characterize as “bio-icons.” We also ask what is at stake in placing the fatherly body under scrutiny in the wake of the feminist, post-structuralist, and post-colonialist turns in social scientific and historical scholarship.

The workshop thus seeks to bring to the fore the performative dimensions of sovereignty—widely conceived to range from notions of autonomy to exercise of authority—as these become visible in the calculated displays of political and stately bodies. We are particularly interested in understanding how image and media cultures work to turn flesh-and-blood bodies into spectacles in public and performative contexts, and are especially sensitive to the gendered dimensions of such spectacular performances. Not least, we wish to understand what such “sovereign” performances tell us about the national body politic that such icons enliven with their public displays.

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Program

Friday, January 23

1.00 p.m.: Welcome and Introduction

Barbara Mittler (University of Heidelberg/Stanford Humanities Center) and Sumathi Ramaswamy (Duke University)

Session 1 *The Global Icon: Body and Power on Display*

1.15–2.30 p.m.

Bishnupriya Ghosh (University of California, Santa Barbara)

“Coming Alive: Image Performances of Gandhi and Che”

2.30–3.45 p.m.:

Gunter Leypoldt (University of Heidelberg)

“The Materiality of Charismatic Performance: How Politicians become Representative Men”

3.45–4.00 p.m.: Break

Session II *Spectacle: Performing the Postmortem Body*

4.00.–5.15 p.m.

Sharika Thiranagama (Stanford University)

“Younger Brother, Elder Brother, Leader, Sun God: Prabhakaran and the Sacralization of Death in Sri Lanka”

5.15-6.30 p.m.

Haiyan Lee (Stanford University)

“Mao’s Two Bodies: On the Curious (Political) Art of Impersonating the Great Helmsman”

7.00 p.m.: Workshop Dinner

Saturday, January 24

Session III: *Sovereignty: The Political Body and his Other*

9.30–10.45 a.m.

Xiaomei Chen (University of California, Davis)

“Staging First Ladies: Glamorous Wives, Supporting Leaders, But Never a Role of Their Own?”

10.45 a.m.–12.00 a.m.

Thomas Maissen (University of Heidelberg /Deutsches Historisches Institut, Paris)

“The Father of the Nation and his Wife: Early Modern Representations of the Sovereign Political Body”

12.00 a.m.–13.00 p.m.: Lunch

Session IV. *Performing Stately Bodies*

1.00–2.15 p.m.

Grant Parker (Stanford University)

“Nelson Mandela: A Life in Statues”

2.15–3.30 p.m.

Barbara Mittler (University of Heidelberg/Stanford Humanities Center) & **Sumathi Ramaswamy** (Duke University)

“No Parallels? The Fatherly Bodies of Mahatma Gandhi and Chairman Mao”

3.30–3.45 p.m.: Break

3.45–5.00 p.m.: Final Discussion (led by Wang Ban, Stanford University)

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Workshop Abstracts
(in order of presentation)

Bishnupriya Ghosh, “Coming Alive: Image Performances of Gandhi and Che”

My talk addresses theorizes the liveliness of images in general, and of the global bio-icon in particular. I argue that “image performances” of Mahatma Gandhi and Che Gueverra on different media platforms—received in calendar art, photographs, cinema, currency notes—habitually embed recipients in networks of social relations. Such embedding is business as usual for living figures anointed as fathers of nations: consider how the institutionalized image on a currency note immediately networks buyers and sellers into a space of a sovereign state. But beyond the institutional mobilization, my interest lies in their capacity to articulate collective aspirations against the hegemon, and therein in their social efficacy. We take note of such popular mobilizations when large-scale events such as riots, demonstrations, or campaigns harness the image to specific goals, agendas, even programs. On these occasions, as crowds “re-sacralize” (as art historian Kajri Jain has argued) a famous image in acts of adoration (and sometimes, desecration), it “comes alive” or volatilizes. The question I want to pursue for this workshop is: how do we explain this capacity to “come alive” from perspectives in *image studies*? That is, instead of focusing on the historical explanation for the sudden igniting of an image, one in which the image is mere support for a movement already under way, I want to consider the image as *constitutive* of historical events.

“Coming alive” focuses on the three directions pertinent to agency of the image. First, there is the animating power of the image, a magical agency (to cite anthropologist, Alfred Gell) born of the corporeal relations between image and recipient. Second, there is the biographical function of specific images in which the recursive narrations of the “life” forges social networks. These narrations focalize the image so that the bio-icon appears at once representative and exemplary. And finally, “coming alive” refers to the capacity of the image to produce subjects, spaces, and events through its circulation across media platforms. The three modulations of liveliness draw on contemporary thought in media studies—studies of the phenomenology of the image, of media ecologies, and of social functionality—to think about how everyday images can live beyond their historical time. I focus my analysis through a comparative study of the spectacularly corporeal images of the two global icons, pausing on the difference of Gandhi and Che’s masculinities. To this end, my point of historical reference will be a recent cinematic image of Gandhi (in Rajkumar Hirani’s *Lage Raho Munna Bhai*, 2006) and the most widely circulated 1960 photographic image of Che (in Alberto Korda’s “Guerrillero Heroico”). My goal is not the elaboration of these historical images but an analysis of their capacity for critical enchantment.

Günter Leypolt, “The Materiality of Charismatic Performance: How Politicians become Representative Men”

This presentation explores the material and performative processes that can turn politicians into iconic embodiments of the higher political life of a culture or society. Looking at the

iconicity of George Washington and Barack Obama, I will explore how the transfiguration of ordinary lives into consecrated national symbols hinges on their performative connection to collective topographies of “charismatic value.” Charismatic space occupies the privileged side of a spectrum of strong-value hierarchies (sacred/profane, high/low, pure/impure, deep/superficial, democratic-undemocratic etc.); its material manifestations combine historically contingent “imaginary topographies” (Camelot, Arnoldian Culture, historical memory, Heaven, Democracy) with actual sites and institutions (churches, art museums, Pantheons, literary canons, political institutions, etc.). With reference to Washington and Obama I will explore the ways in which charismatic performances may transform political meanings into higher or lower materialities whose “social lives” vary across local and global (trans)cultural settings.

Sharika Thiranagama, “Younger Brother, Elder Brother, Leader, Sun God: Prabhakaran and the Sacralization of Death in Sri Lanka”

In May 2009, photographs of a face with much of the head missing, dead eyes staring and mustache intact, circulated across the internet as proof that Velupillai Prabhakaran, the leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), internationally known as the Tamil Tigers, was dead. The Sri Lankan army release of these photographs of the notorious “001” was immediately followed by the counter-release (by some in the Tamil diaspora) of photo-shopped pictures of Prabhakaran seemingly watching the TV announcing his own death, attempting to instead resuscitate Prabhakaran’s body, one iconic for Tamil nationalism, understanding that Prabhakaran had come to stand for and subsume the organization so totally that his death was the death of all. The Sri Lankan state similarly understood the death of Prabhakaran as the symptomatic end of the civil war, the Sri Lankan president announcing the two together.

Founding the militant organization, which came to be known as the LTTE in the 1970s, as a sixteen year old, Prabhakaran’s impassive mustachioed face and expanding waistline accompanied a tight grip over a highly militarized and secretive organization. By the 1990s when the LTTE had expanded from a Tamil militant organization into a quasi-state with an ever more conventional army, Prabhakaran had emerged as the epitome of a supreme leader, not only in charge of the central committee but also as standing for the organization, internationally, locally and within the organization. Loyalty to Prabhakaran was made synonymous with the organization. Prabhakaran’s annual speech on “Heroes Day” was broadcast via the LTTE media locally and internationally to the diaspora as if it functioned as a presidential speech, the speech’s banalities and equivocations poured over as policy pronouncement for the coming year. This paper takes Prabhakaran’s trajectory from his spectacular teenage assassination of the popular Jaffna mayor Alfred Duraippah as a “Tamil traitor” and as his entrance into the militant scene to his final years as a middle-aged supremo, mapped through his changing honorifics. Beginning as *thambi* (younger Brother), then *anna* (elder brother), *Thalaiwar* (leader) which was increasingly his popular designation outside of the organization), finally he came globally to be referred to as *Suryathevan* (Sun God) an honorific adopted by the Sri Lankan diaspora with little purchase within Sri Lanka. This paper will examine Prabhakaran through both the kinds of spectacular sovereignty that he prompted around himself as a supreme leader, and, the kind of persona he practiced which re-entrenched a Tamil masculinity rooted in respectability, land, and an obsession with purity - political,

sexual, and personal. It will try to approach both how “love of the leader” could suture together an organization that cannibalized itself and its Tamil population continually in order to keep its hold on power, and, how love of the leader was synonymous with gifting one’s life to the leader.

Haiyan Lee, “Mao’s Two Bodies: On the Curious (Political) Art of Impersonating the Great Helmsman”

In this essay, I investigate how the political-theological idea of Mao’s two bodies lives on in the performative art of Mao impersonation in contemporary China. I look at both the institutionalized practice of using “special actors” to portray Mao (and other political leaders) in PRC “main-melody” film and television and the emerging phenomenon of freelance impersonators reenacting Mao’s speeches and calligraphy at tourist sites and entertainment venues. Framing this discussion is a close reading of Yiyun Li’s short story, “Immortality,” about the fate of a man born with Mao’s face and groomed to be Mao’s official impersonator. By situating Mao impersonation in the spectrum of performative practices from spirit mediumship at one end to satirical art at the other, I aim to make sense of the fraught relationship between Mao’s image magic and its aesthetic and commercial appropriations, while critiquing the problematic aspects of Li’s story that seem to underlie much of Western (mis)understanding of China. I also address the question commonly raised by Western journalists—why are the Mao impersonators determinedly unfunny?

Xiaomei Chen, “Staging First Ladies: Glamorous Wives, Supporting Leaders, But Never a Role of their Own?”

This essay explores stage performances of first ladies, whose real-life experience and reconstructed characters in theater and on screen reflected how Chinese artists and intellectuals represent women’s limited role in revolutionary eras. In the first part of the essay, I examine stage, cinematic and television dramas which featured Jiang Qing, Mao Zedong’s third wife, and these genres’ gradual progression from depicting her as a destructive leader during the Cultural Revolution to a loving companion of Mao, especially during the Yan’an period. I argue that post-socialist nostalgia of the Mao era based on its appealing values of equality and collective spirit called for Jiang’s return to Chinese stage as a “good woman of Mao.”

This role reversal, however, does not necessarily lead to a more liberal view of the first ladies in the later generation. Peng Liyuan 彭丽媛, President Xi Jinping’s 习近平 wife, was recently described in the Western media as the “glamorous, fashionable and one of her nation’s best-known singers, a startling contrast to her dour-looking predecessors” upon her first trip abroad in accompanying Xi as China’s leader. Could Peng, however, “carve out a new role for her self” while avoiding the historical pitfalls of Jiang, who was once an equally glamorous film star in the 1930s Shanghai before her marriage to Mao, but was never allowed to play the role of the first lady in the political theater of the PRC, and was nonetheless scandalized as a sinful woman who had “corrupted” Mao.

Would history repeat itself in not allowing a first lady to become an equal to the first man? The second part of this essay compares Peng’s theater career with that of her predecessor: Jiang longed for playing the dramatic roles of empresses and kings and thought

little of her small parts such as wives of poor farmers and street peddlers she had played in Shanghai cinema. Her marriage to Mao in Yan'an, however, was pre-conditioned by not only a ban on her performing career, but most damagingly, a ban on any participation in the Chinese politics until 20 years later, when she finally seized the opportunity to promote a "theatrical revolution" 戏剧革命 during the Cultural Revolution.

Peng Liyuan, on the other hand, had become a household opera star with her stunning performance of Communist heroines and ancient woman warrior such as Hua Mulan 花木兰, long before Xi became the President. As Xi ascended into the top leadership positions in the PRC, however, Peng stopped appearing on stage, "in step with the traditional secondary role played by the wives of Chinese leaders." Her performance background was seen, nevertheless, as "definitely add[ing] points for her husband," explored as a "diplomatic idol" for China's playing of soft power on international stage, as so reflected in her selection as a good-will ambassador for AIDS and tuberculosis by the World Health Organization in 2011. Against China's expectations of finally having a beautiful first lady, equal to Michelle Obama and Jacky Kennedy, Peng's glamorous stardom could only help her husband shine in world politics. The collective memory of a negative role of Jiang blocked Peng's career either as a theater star or as the first lady. The accent to the first family ironically left Peng unable to shine again on the center stage, as she had once done so in the Lincoln Center in New York in 2005 and at the Vienna State Opera House in 2008. Peng repeats Jiang's supporting role of "a good woman of Xi" despite her brief appearance on international stage. From the global perspective of the twentieth-first century, this paper intends to ask some questions about what to do with imagined first ladies, theatrical bodies, political icons and gendered power.

Thomas Maissen, "The Father of the Nation and his Wife: Early Modern Representations of the Sovereign Political Body"

When a new Doge is elected, he is welcomed with relief, because everybody got what was needed: Venice has received a head and master, the Republic her spouse („Ci ha dato un Principe in cui tutti han trovato quel di che avean bisogno: Vinegia un capo, la Republica uno Sposo.“). In many early modern states, the accession of a new ruler is interpreted as the wedding with the body politic. This paper will study the different uses that such a metaphor makes possible: besides marriage also courtship, adultery, rape, and divorce. Accordingly, the male ruler is characterized in very different ways, as a more or less legitimate spouse of the "nation". While he was a concrete person, recognizable in his portraiture, she was an allegory whose iconography often was inspired by the virgin Mary. Her attributes and not least her position vis à vis the spouse are indicative for understanding the political constitution the couple is representing.

Grant Parker, "Nelson Mandela: A life in Statues"

Of the many ways in which Nelson Mandela has been honored and commemorated, bronze statues constitute a particular subset. This presentation will consider some key examples. A few statues (e.g. Ian Walter, London, 1985) date from the struggle against apartheid, whereas most postdate his release in 1990. In South Africa several larger-than-life statues have been erected in metropolitan centers, including a nine-meter colossus outside the Union Buildings in Pretoria. In this talk I'll survey the main

Mandela statues, especially the most recent trends, and consider what is at stake in the choice of medium and location. Where does the impetus to commemorate Mandela come from? What is at stake in the choices made concerning statues? To what extent does a single memorial conceptually unify an individual (in this case Mandela)? Do the statues suggest different Mandelas?

Barbara Mittler & Sumathi Ramaswamy,

“No Parallels? The Fatherly Bodies of Gandhi and Mao”

The anchor image for our presentation is by the Indian artist Gigi Scaria, *No Parallels*. In this six-minute video-installation work, shown in 2010 in Shanghai at the Place-Time-Play exhibition, co-curated by Chang Tsong-Zung and Chaitanya Sambrani, Scaria audaciously juxtaposes a series of images of Mahatma Gandhi and Chairman Mao that illustrate the performative dimensions of their sovereignty as these become visible in the calculated displays of their political and stately bodies. An archive of historical photographs of Gandhi and Mao is set in motion, but in spite of the seeming parallelisms between the images, Scaria sets out to propose that there was “no parallel” between these men.

In this presentation, we interrogate this assumption by exploring how these two paradigmatic “peasant” nationalists have been transformed into hyper-visible “bio-icons” (Ghosh) precisely through the interventions of image and media practices taking place both in their own time and posthumously. In our exploration of how the long traditions of Indian and Chinese iconophilia lead to what philosopher Bruno Latour has productively characterized as “iconoclash”, we consciously bring the male body to the forefront of our analysis. We ask how such practices have turned their flesh-and-blood bodies into spectacles in public and performative contexts and made them into veritable “fathers of the nation.” The corporeal appears to have been critical to the affective and ethical hold that these men (and others like them) have had over their constituencies and beyond, even while it made them vulnerable to caricature or ridicule as well. How does the work of vision vary when their fatherly bodies enter the fray? (How) do they succeed in looking—and playing—the part? Consciously adopting a contrapuntal methodological approach that draws together within a single frame two “Asian” life trajectories that have more often than not been kept apart (“No Parallel”!), we consider how critical images and signature image-events have contributed to a complex interplay between the iconization and the demonization of these men.