Explicit, S ex-Themed Visual Imagery as Regulated Representations in China and Japan

In November 2003, the Chinese News Agency Xinhua reported that three Japanese students and a lecturer were expelled from the Chinese Language School of Northwest China University in the historic city of Xi’an after they staged an “obscene” cultural performance in which they wore red brassieres and fake genitals over their clothes. The Chinese students in the audience were outraged. They disrupted the performance, and the next day, thousands of them held a demonstration in front of the dormitory of the international students of the university, demanding an apology from the Japanese performers. The matter quickly became a diplomatic incident between China and Japan. The Chinese Foreign Ministry lectured the Japanese government about intercultural respect. It asked Japan to educate Japanese students who wished to study in China to abide by the laws of China and the regulations of Chinese universities and to respect the customs of the Chinese people (Japanese FM Criticizes Obscene Performance in China, 2003). In response, the Japanese Foreign Minister, Y oriko Kawaguchi, criticized the three Japanese students and teacher for the performance. She said Japanese students studying abroad should understand and respect the customs of their host countries (Japanese Embassy Cops an Earful, 2003).

The “obscene” performance, which resulted in the expulsion of the Japanese students and teacher from the Chinese Language School of Northwest China University, demonstrates cultural differences between China and Japan over explicit, sex-themed images and performances. However, it is also a testament to the historically sensitive relations between Japan and China over matters of sex. Japan invaded Manchuria, China, in 1931 and occupied it until the end of World War II in 1945. In 1937, Japanese soldiers carried out the infamous “Rape of Nanking,” during which thousands of civilians were massacred with the utmost savagery, and more than twenty thousand women were raped in the most savage and sadistic fashion imaginable (International Military Tribunal For the Far East, 1948). Additionally, the Japanese Army is believed to have kept a large group of women as “comfort women.” This deceptive term describes women and girls forced to work as sex slaves in Japanese Army brothels or comfort stations in China, Korea, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Burma, and other territories the Japanese...
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Imperial Army occupied during World War II (Argibay, 2003). The sex-themed performance of the Japanese students and lecturer at Northwest China University opened up old emotional scars in Sino-Japanese history, a painful past that has not been forgotten.

Aim of the Chapter

The aim of this chapter is to describe and explain the diversity of regulation of explicit, sex-themed visual media content in Asia, using as exemplary case studies the specific cultural and legal contexts of China and Japan. The chapter seeks to explore how these countries reconcile the right of freedom of expression with restrictions against media content considered to be obscene and detrimental to public order and morality within each country’s specific politico-cultural and religious context. This chapter therefore surveys regulation of explicit, sex-themed visual imagery in China and Japan. These countries have ancient cultures of sex-themed visual communication that stand in stark contrast to the traditions and cultures of the Western countries we have studied so far. In these Asian countries, explicit, sex-themed imagery was produced in several media, including woodblock printing and painting on silk, wood, and other surfaces. The explicit, sex-themed visual imagery of each of these countries had some religious element. Though the two countries now regulate explicit, sex-themed imagery on the Internet within the context of contemporary political, social, and religious realities, a survey of their regulations over time shows that in these countries, explicit, sex-themed visual imagery has always been a form of regulated representation that was controlled within specific national cultural contexts.

Explicit, Sex-Themed Art as Regulated Representation in China: A Brief Survey

In April 2014, the English-language edition of the government-owned Chinese News Agency Xinhua reported that the Chinese government had launched one of its periodic antipornographic campaigns on the Internet. Xinhua reported that more than 3,300 accounts on the China-based social networking sites WeChat and Sina Weibo, as well as numerous Chinese-language online forums, had been deleted by the government (Xinhua News Agency, 2014). Additionally, 7,000 advertisements and 220,000 texts had been deleted as part of China’s antipornography campaign, code-named “Cleaning the Web 2014.” Frequent antipornography campaigns are a feature of China’s gateway model of Internet regulation, under which the government censors all Internet content that it considers to be politically or morally unacceptable. This system of control is sarcastically referred to as the “Great Fire-Wall of China.” This system controls citizens’ access to the Internet and prevents them from accessing political, pornographic, and news media, as well as other sites that the government considers objectionable (Eko, Kumar, and Yao, 2011; Riley, 2014).

As this frequent Internet pornography crackdowns demonstrate, in China, explicit, sex-themed imagery (pornography) on the Internet is a rule-based phenomenon. For more than seventy years, the Chinese Communist Party’s regime has suppressed explicit, sex-themed imagery on the grounds that it is part of the feudal system that was overthrown in 1911 and was replaced by the Republic of