


Asian Youth Culture in a Globalizing World

By James Farrer

Networked and Not Inhibited

One of the hallmarks of modernity is the invention of the concept of “youth” as an intermediate period between childhood and full adult responsibilities.

In industrialized Asian countries, extended schooling and delayed marriage mean that many young people now delay full adulthood well into their third decade of life.



ASIAN YOUTH CAME TO THE FORE in the early twentieth century. University students led modernizing political and cultural movements such as China's May 4th movement in 1919, while "modern" boys and girls were the focus of moral panics and conservative criticism in the 1920s.

In China, Chiang Kai-shek's New Life Movement of the 1930s aimed to stamp out the decadent habits of youth with a modernizing program of moral education and physical discipline inspired in part by Nazi Germany and imperial Japan. In some ways, worries about youth are ancient concerns. Asians under the sway of Confucius have always emphasized the moral vulnerability of youth. The mother of Confucian sage Mencius reportedly moved the family abode three times (孟母三迁 *mengmusanqian*) to avoid the bad influences of local social mores on her son. Despite this long history of social pressure, I would argue that Asian youth face some very new opportunities and challenges

related to globalization. I focus on four issues: the internet, sexuality, labor-market competition and the seemingly paradoxical embrace of both nationalism and cosmopolitanism by Asian youth.

ASIA'S INTERNET GENERATION

Modern youth culture would not be possible without modern media. Every generation of Asian youth has mobilized through its own specialized media, ranging from political journals in 1920s China, to J-pop music in bubble-era Japan. The current generation of Asian youth could be described collectively as the "internet generation." Even North Korean youth are embracing the country's limited internet, including online dating.¹ Through the internet Asian youth in different countries are arguably for the first time in history living in the same transnational space and time, although still divided to some extent by language, culture and politics.

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1 "Weird but wired: North Korea and the internet: Online dating in Pyongyang? Surely not" *Economist*, 2/3/2007, Vol. 382, Issue 8514

2 Interview in Tokyo, March 14, 2007

3 "MySpace faces culture hurdles – and Mixi – in Japan" CNN.com, posted February 16, 2007. <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/BUSINESS/02/16/japan.mixi.ap/index.html>

4 Lagervist, Johan. 2006. *The Internet in China: Unlocking and Containing the Public Sphere*. Phd Dissertation, Department of East Asian Languages, Lund University

The cell phone rather than the personal computer may be the most ubiquitous internet platform for Asian youth. According to Mr. Katsu Kuwano, Country Managing Director for Match.com Japan, many Japanese youth can type faster with their thumbs on a cell phone touchpad than with their fingers on a keyboard.² Text messaging is also ubiquitous among youth in other Asian countries, where it generally represents a cheaper alternative to voice calls, but also a way of staying constantly connected to friends and romantic partners on a 24-hour basis. Anyone who has tried to teach undergraduate classes in Tokyo or Shanghai has seen the students constantly messaging beneath their desks.

According to Kuwano, who has fifteen years of experience in the consumer internet business in Japan, the most significant trend for young internet users in Japan is online social networking, led by Japan's own Mixi with over 8 million users. Mixi's dominance in Japan also reflects the national and cultural distinctions that still characterize the internet, despite its transnational reach. For example, Mixi's layout emphasizes the Japanese preference for forming groups or cliques of friends rather than more ostentatious presentation of the self emphasized by its international competitor, Myspace.com from the US.³

Still, social networking and other types of internet sites do enable transnational ties to form among youth in Asia. Cyworld, the dominant social networking player in Korea, is moving into China, Japan and Taiwan markets. Massively multiplayer online game playing is already a transnational pastime, led by Korean companies. International dating is also popular online in Asia, and made much easier by international online dating platforms such as Match.com.

Less optimistically, the internet has also enabled the growth of narrowly nationalistic,

sometimes fiercely xenophobic discussions online, including anti-Japanese rhetoric on China's state owned websites,⁴ as well as rightwing nationalist rhetoric within Japan itself. Oddly enough, nationalist discourse is also a pathway to greater interaction. It is easy to find Chinese and Japanese nationalists engaged in fierce, nasty arguments on English language bulletin boards hosted in third countries. Despite these divergences in politics, language and commercial platforms, the medium of the internet itself ties together Asian youth in ways that would have been unimaginable twenty years ago – including trends in personal mores, fashion and work.

SEXUAL REVOLUTION AMONG ASIA'S YOUTH

Asia's rapid internet revolution is clearly implicated in the other great revolution that has swept through Asia's youth: the sexual revolution. Online dating is only part of this connection. More important are the spread of alternative sexual discourses and the formation of sexual communities online. Gay and lesbian Asian youth in particular have benefited from access to online information resources and communities.⁵ Heterosexual Asian youth also use blogs to express ideas too sensitive or unconventional for mainstream media. Beginning in 2004, a young Singaporean woman with the online name "Miss Izzy" used her blog to defend her precocious sexual lifestyle as a "teenage sarong party girl," a slang term that refers to Asian Singaporean women who date Western men.⁶ She became a local celebrity, appearing on Singaporean television to debate her sexual choices. Samsung now sponsors her site.⁷ Similarly, in June 19, 2003, a 25 year-old Guangzhou magazine editor Li Li began posting a diary of her numerous sexual experiences on the Chinese internet site Blogcn.com. Using the pen-

5 Zhongxin Sun, James Farrer, Kyung-hee Choi. 2006. "Sexual identity among men who have sex with men in Shanghai" *China Perspectives* No. 64. March-April. Pp. 2-12. http://www.cefc.com.hk/uk/pc/articles/art_ligne.php?num_art_ligne=6401

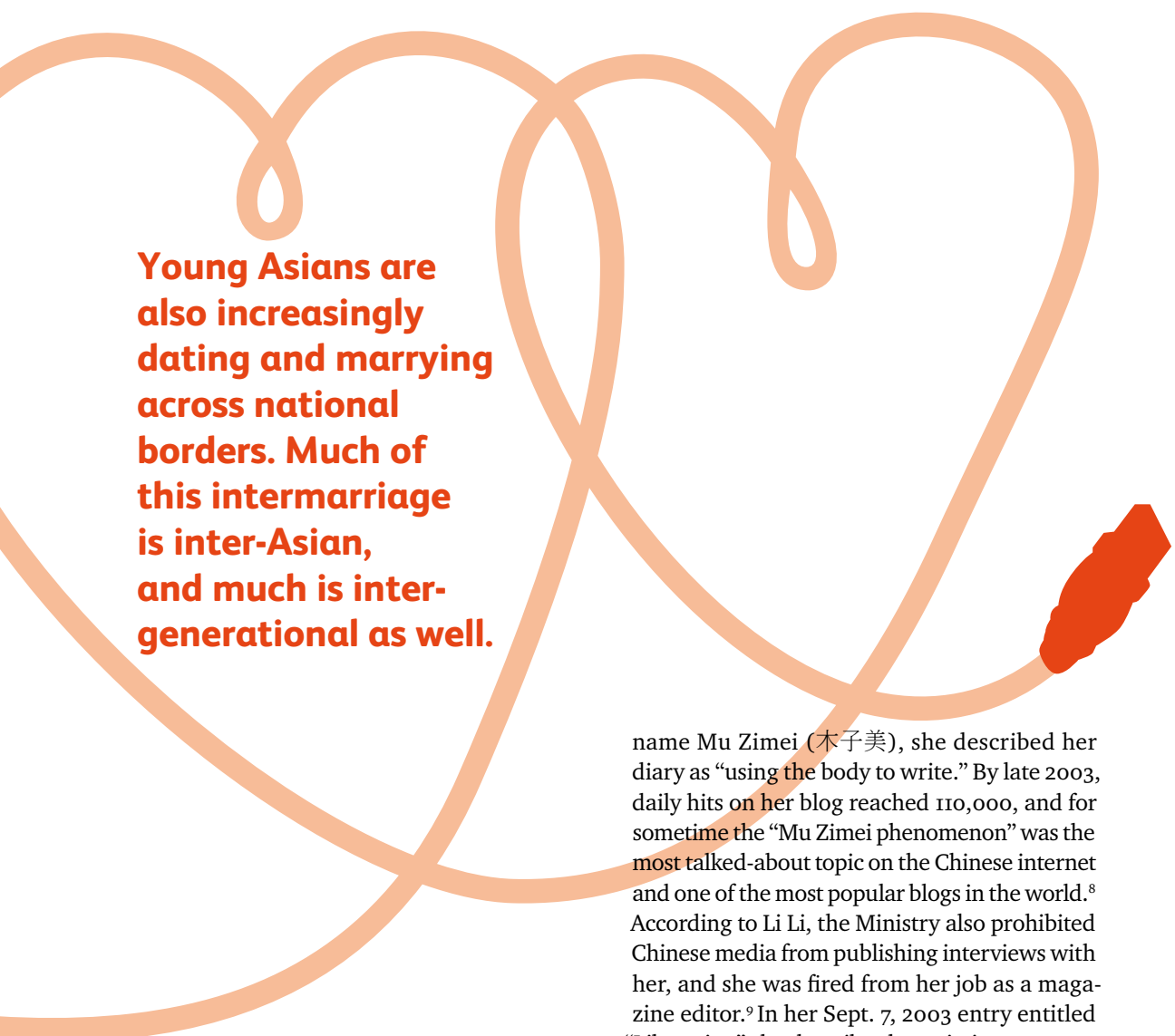
6 "Why White Expats?" <http://www.missizy.org/2004/04/12/why-white-expats>. posted April 12, 2004

7 According to the March 9, 2007 posting on www.missizy.org

8 "Sex writer creates a stir, gains a following" [Chinadaily.com](http://www1.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2003-11/24/content_284039.htm) http://www1.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2003-11/24/content_284039.htm. posted Nov. 24, 2003

9 Personal interview with Mu Zimei, April 20, 2004

10 木子美 (Mu Zimei) 逸情书 (Left-over love letters) Sept. 7, 2003 entry originally on <http://www.blogcn.net/user/muzimei/main.asp> (accessed Feb. 24, 2004, on <http://www.ec35.com/muzimei/>), my translation



Young Asians are also increasingly dating and marrying across national borders. Much of this intermarriage is inter-Asian, and much is inter-generational as well.

name Mu Zimei (木子美), she described her diary as "using the body to write." By late 2003, daily hits on her blog reached 110,000, and for sometime the "Mu Zimei phenomenon" was the most talked-about topic on the Chinese internet and one of the most popular blogs in the world.⁸ According to Li Li, the Ministry also prohibited Chinese media from publishing interviews with her, and she was fired from her job as a magazine editor.⁹ In her Sept. 7, 2003 entry entitled "Liberation" she describes her mission:

I think that the liberation of human nature is more important than just writing about the body. The truth that people express in sexual intercourse is difficult to find in other everyday experiences. Nudity and sexual intercourse are the most effective ways to express human nature.¹⁰

Some of the subsequent attacks on Mu Zimei in the state-owned media resembled the full-fledged

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11 David Leheny. 2006. *Think Global, Fear Local: Sex, Violence, and Anxiety in Contemporary Japan*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press

12 Andrew Salmon "South Korea targets sex trade, for now" *International Herald Tribune*, October 19, 2004. The article points out that brothel owners were involved in organizing the protests

13 Ibid

14 *Asian Labour Update*. 2003. "Union for Sex Workers" www.amrc.org.hk/4718.htm

15 James Farrer. 2002. *Opening Up: Youth Sex Culture and Market Reform in Shanghai*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

16 潘绥铭, 杨芯 (Pan Suiming and Yang Xin) · 2004. 性爱十年: 全国大学生性行为的追踪调查. (Ten years of love sex: a longitudinal survey of sexual behavior in Chinese university students) Beijing: Academy of Social Sciences

17 "Japanese women having sex younger" *Japan Times* Nov. 12, 2006 accessed on <http://www.asiansexgazette.com/asg/japan/japan06news08.htm>

public condemnations of the Cultural Revolution era in China, but Mu Zimei also had her many public defenders, and even admirers. And despite the earlier threat of media bans, she remains active on the Chinese internet. She has inspired countless online sex blog imitators. She also was instrumental in mobilizing Chinese "sexual conservatives" and youth with more moderate views to speak out on the internet. Youth sexual expression on the internet is characterized by its pluralism.

The strong public and government reaction against Mu Zimei can be considered part of a moral panic among adults and political elites over youth sexuality – particularly young women's sexuality – that is not limited to China. Political scientist David Leheny argues that media images of under-age Japanese women selling sex to older men became a public symbol of moral decline and national crisis in Japan in the 1990s.¹¹ Similarly, in Korea growing middle-class concerns over long-term practices of prostitution led to a stringent new anti-prostitution law that brought Seoul sex workers onto the streets in protest in 2004.¹²

While youth sexuality may serve as a metaphor for larger national concerns, I suggest that these

moral panics are often really about sex itself. Young people's involvement in prostitution is one real issue that many Asian countries face. In the Korean prostitution case, for example, a report by the Korean Institute of Criminology found that the sex industry before the crackdown accounted for 4% of gross domestic product and employed 4.1 percent of women in their twenties – or 300,000 women.¹³ The U.S. State Department has criticized both Korea and Japan for their involvement in trafficking young, mostly Asian women into the commercial sex sectors in these countries. Both China and Japan have huge sex industries employing many young women and a smaller number of young men. According to economist Takashi Kadokura, the commercial sexual services sector in Japan accounted for ¥2.37 trillion in 2001, or nearly \$20 billion.¹⁴ In China, estimates of the numbers of sex workers range from 4 million to 8 million, most of whom are young rural-to-urban women migrants.

More recently, the "Korean wave" has swept across Asia. Korean singers such as "Rain" sell out concerts in Chinese cities. These inter-Asian cultural flows should not, however, be seen as opposed to larger global flows or simply as an "Asian" alternative to Western cultural influences.

18 Norimitsu Onishi and Su-Hyun Lee. "International marriage: Betrothed at First Sight: A Korean-Vietnamese Courtship" *New York Times* February 22, 2007, p. A-1; Caren Freeman. "Marrying Up and Marrying Down: the Paradoxes of Marital Mobility for Chosonjok Brides in South Korea" in Nicole Constable, ed., *Cross-Border Marriages: Gender and Mobility in Transnational Asia*. University of Pittsburgh Press, pp. 80-100

19 Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare. 2004. <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/saikin/hw/jinkou/suii04/marr2.html>

20 *Statistical Abstracts of Shanghai*. 2006. <http://www.stats-sh.gov.cn/2005stj/index.asp>

21 Koichi Iwabuchi. 2002. *Recentring Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*. Durham: Duke

This panic also is triggered by the increasing sexual activity of unmarried middle-class Asian youth. Mainland China experienced a revolution in sexual mores in the 1990s.¹⁵ Surveys in recent years have indicated a radical switch to more permissive attitudes toward premarital sex among Chinese youth, and an increase in actual sexual behavior among unmarried young people, including a majority of recent university graduates.¹⁶ According to a survey conducted in 2005 by the Japanese Association for Sex Education, 62 percent of Japanese female university students have had sex, up 10 percentage points from only 6 years before and now reaching the same level as their male peers.¹⁷ In sum, across Asia evidence points to a sexual revolution among youth, including public sexual expressions on the internet and private sexual behavior. This also brings risks such as unwanted pregnancy, HIV, other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and the personal safety risks associated with sex work.

Young Asians are also increasingly dating and marrying across national borders. Much of this intermarriage is inter-Asian, and much is inter-generational as well. In 2005, marriages to foreigners accounted for 14 percent of all marriages in South Korea, up from 4 percent in 2000. Many of these involved middle-aged Korean men marrying young women from Vietnam, China and the Philippines.¹⁸ In Japan, international marriages now account for about 5 percent of total registered marriages and about 10% in Tokyo. The greatest number involve Japanese men marrying women from East

Asian countries.¹⁹ In Shanghai, where about 3 percent of marriages registered in recent years include a foreign spouse, 90 percent of international marriages involve Chinese women marrying foreign men, with Japanese and overseas Chinese the most common.²⁰ Intermarriage is thus an increasingly common feature of sexual and social life in many Asian societies, but with a statistical tendency for somewhat older men from richer countries to marry somewhat younger women from poorer countries.

INTER-ASIAN CULTURAL FLOWS, CULTURAL HYBRIDITY AND CULTURAL NATIONALISM

Regional integration and globalization have also changed the pop cultural landscape of Asia. In the 1980s and 1990s Japanese popular culture dominated inter-Asian flows. Hong Kong and Bombay also became important regional cultural centers. More recently, the "Korean boom" or "Korean wave" has swept across Asia. Korean singers such as "Rain" sell out concerts in Chinese cities. These inter-Asian cultural flows should not, however, be seen as opposed to larger global flows or simply as an "Asian" alternative to western cultural influences. Sociologist Iwabuchi Koichi suggests that much of what other Asians appreciated in their consumption of Japanese soap operas in the 1990s was, in fact, a kind of Japanese interpretation of values the Japanese had themselves learned from Americans, especially themes involving individual choice in romantic love.²¹ From Asian hip-hop fashion to dance music trends, Asian



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and Euro-American cultural products seem increasingly intermixed rather than opposed.

A related trend is the celebration of racial and cultural hybridity in Asian youth culture. In Japan and other Asian societies, the negative qualities once associated with mixed-race children and “returnees” – Asian youth who grew up overseas – are being replaced with a new positive appreciation of cultural hybridity that extends to the body itself. All over Asia, mixed race models and stars – particularly Caucasian-Asian mixed

men and women such as Japan’s Beni Arashiro – grace billboards and the covers of youth and fashion magazines.

Bilingualism and biculturalism are embraced more than ever before as signs of personal success and style. One of

Japan’s new stars is a young woman Crystal

Kay Williams, known as “Kuri,” whose

father is African-American and whose mother is a

third generation Korean living in

Japan. She sings soulful R&B tunes in both

Japanese and English, but is largely perceived

as a Japanese pop star. “M-flo,” one of

the biggest acts in Japanese hip-hop, also

is led by a Japanese of Korean descent who

developed his musical interests while living in the US.

22 Kosaku Yoshino (editor). 1999. *Consuming Ethnicity and Nationalism: Asian Experiences*. University of Hawaii Press

23 James Farrer. 2005. "Nationalism Pits Shanghai Against its Global Ambition" in Yale Global Online (April 29, 2005). <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/display.article?id=5658>

24 山根祐作 (Yamane Yusaku)、「学生急増で厳しい就職難」(Rising number of students creates job-hunting difficulties)、朝日新聞 (Asahi Shinbun)、Feb. 27, 2007, p.9

25 星井麻紀 (Hoshi Maki)、「公」とつながりたい「私」、学生急増で厳しい就職難”(Rising number of students creates job-hunting difficulties)、朝日新聞 (Asahi Shinbun)、Feb. 28, 2007, p. 17

26 Gracia Liu Farrer. 2007. "Educationally channeled international labor migration: post 1978 student mobility from China to Japan" University of Chicago PhD Dissertation

Paradoxically this celebration of cultural hybridity and cosmopolitan chic in Asia's global cities goes hand in hand with the rise of cultural nationalism among Asian youth. Sociologist Yoshino Kosaku attributes this trend partly to the commercialization of nationalist sentiment in events such as the soccer World Cup, rather than to any deep-seated ideological stance.²² Nationalism can be simply a way to package goods and organize commercial events. However, when we look at intense expressions of anti-foreign sentiment such as the anti-Japanese protests that mobilized youth all over China in 2005,²³ more fundamental sources of discontent are obviously at play. To some extent, these events reflect entrenched historical conflicts that youth have inherited from their parents and grandparents, partly through nationalist indoctrination in schools. But they also reflect reactions against the more immediate pressures of globalization that contemporary Asian youth face.

THE PRESSURES OF GLOBALIZATION

Globalization has brought the internet, sexual liberalization and a bonanza of pop cultural products to Asian youth, but it has also brought increased educational and job competition. Less educated youth in rich regions such as Japan and Taiwan see their jobs migrating to cheaper labor markets. More highly educated youth find themselves competing in an increasingly broader and deeper transnational pool of talent. Although rapid economic growth in India and China has produced vast numbers of new jobs, there has been an even faster expansion of tertiary educational institutions.

China alone, the number of new college graduates nearly quintupled between 2000 and 2007, increasing from 1.07 million to 4.95 million in 8 years. The Chinese Ministry of Education was con-

cerned that 1.5 million of them might not be able to find jobs.²⁴ While graduates from elite universities such as India's Indian Institute of Technology and China's Tsinghua University face unlimited opportunities, students from newly constructed and often commercially motivated technical institutes and colleges often have difficulties finding jobs that meet their high expectations.

In many ways the problem is less one of absolute unemployment or declining economic fortunes than of greater social inequality and a sense of relative deprivation. Almost all Asian societies are seeing an increasing gap between rich and poor, and a widening rift between professional and business elites and the lower middle-classes. Japanese talk about the new "divided society" (格差社会/*kakusashakai*), in which young people with full-time, tenured jobs can expect very different lives from part-timers and contract employees. The losers in the process of economic globalization are perhaps particularly prone to embrace anti-foreign and nationalist stances, partly in search of a sense of social belonging in societies that seem increasingly fragmented and individualistic.²⁵ On the other hand, many of these youth are likely to become themselves economic and educational migrants, trying to improve their chances with study and work abroad. Despite political tensions, Japan's universities attract tens of thousands of Chinese youth each year, and the booming global cities of Shanghai and Beijing attract thousands of Japanese young people, both groups seeking entry level opportunities in the expanding transnational labor market between the two countries.²⁶

All in all, Asian youth are big beneficiaries of globalization and regional integration. Global and trans-Asian cultural flows undoubtedly are bringing Asian youth closer together. Sexual lifestyles, fashion trends and hobbies likely

will continue to converge. Religious, socially conservative as well as radical and alternative lifestyle interests also will bind divergent interest groups of Asian youth in transnational subcultures linked by the internet. However,

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internal social tensions, deepening economic stratification and political conflicts continue to have a transnational dimension which could thwart and possibly even undermine this optimistic scenario. Asian political leaders would be wise to refrain from mobilizing nationalistic youth sentiments for short-term political gains, especially since these sentiments often reflect resentments at national social and economic policies, and thus could backfire. Asia's prosperity depends on facilitating interactions among the region's young people rather than fostering nationalistic education.

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