



## WORKSHOP ABSTRACT

### Anthropology of Creativity – East Asia through the Lens of Artistic and Everyday Creative Practices

**Organizer:** Klaus J. FRIESE, Anna-Maria STABENTHEINER

**E-Mail Address:** [klausjfriese@hotmail.com](mailto:klausjfriese@hotmail.com)

**Abstract:** Creativity is a fundamental aspect of human activity – it is, as Hallam and Ingold put it, “intrinsic to the very processes of social and cultural life” (2007:18). With the growing influence of new technologies and artificial intelligence, questions regarding the very nature of being human and its relationship to creativity are resurfacing in anthropological discussions. This workshop examines various forms of artistic, vernacular, and cultural creativity in East Asia to contribute to this discussion, asking: What do we mean when we speak of ‘creativity’? Who is (not) (considered) creative and why?

The focus on East Asia hopes to draw participants’ attention beyond ‘Western’ narratives of creativity, which frequently focus on attributes such as modernity, “anti-tradition” and individuality (Hallam and Ingold 2007:16f). By engaging with East Asian perspectives, we hope to construct a broader understanding of creative practice, encompassing the manifold and vibrant expressions of creativity to be found in this region – both contemporaneously and historically. By fostering a critical and interdisciplinary dialogue, we further aim at challenging the persistent, inaccurate stereotype characterizing Asian countries as mere “imitators” lacking in creativity.

To foster an intensive group discussion, this workshop invites participants to participate in two distinct ways:

- Short interventions of 5 to 10 minutes showcasing practical examples of creative practice in East Asia (both current and historical). Herein, we encourage participants to not only discuss creativity, but also to become creative themselves and include different types of media – video, photography, drawing, performance etc. – in combination with short comments in their presentations.
- Longer presentations of 15 to 20 minutes, focused on presenting and advancing theoretical and methodological discussions including creative research methods in the field of the anthropology of creativity.

Reference:

Hallam, Elizabeth, and Tim Ingold, eds. 2007. *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*. Oxford: Berg.

## SESSION SCHEDULE

### Monday, September 23, 2024 | Slot 1 | Room 3

*Hans Thomsen: Creativity through Imitation: Aspects of Japanese Learning (online)*

*Momoka Takahashi: Hidden creativities of engraving and printing in Nishiki-e from pre-modern Japan (online)*

*Antonella Gasdia: Shaping creativity through art and literature - The cases of Sin Saimdang, Han Kang and Suzy Lee (online)*

*Leiyi Lin: The modern metamorphosis: from monkeys and capybaras to the logic of everyday creativity on Chinese social media*

### Monday, September 23, 2024 | Slot 2 | Room 3

*Guilherme Figueiredo: Onisube: The Japanese Festival as a Poetic Act (online)*

*Alberto Gerosa: Chicken Blood*

## SESSION PAPERS

### **Creativity through Imitation: Aspects of Japanese Learning**

*Hans Thomsen*

The Japanese have been falsely labeled in the West as mere “imitators.” This profoundly misunderstands the teaching methods used by artists of various types over centuries of Japanese history. As has been described by others (Rosenfield 1993, Jordan and Weston 2003, Shimizu 1981), the teaching process for Japanese painters started with the close imitation of past masters. For example, Kanō-school painters of the nineteenth century would copy the works of the seventeenth-century painter Kanō Tan'yū (1602-1674). This is true for other artistic traditions as well, for example, contemporary calligraphy teachers will ask students to copy works by the eleventh-century courtier Fujiwara Yukinari (972-1028). By repeated imitation, the students would eventually approach and internalize the writing and painting styles of past masters, and not just one model but several stars of the past. Through the process, the student would eventually be able to produce works of art in such internalized modes and – in a seeming paradox – create original art through the process of imitation.

### **Hidden creativities of engraving and printing in Nishiki-e from pre-modern Japan**

*Momoka Takahashi*

This paper attempts to apply and examine the idea of creativity, which Hallam and Ingold(2007) found in the process of making, to Nishiki-e: Japanese woodblock prints printed in various colors, produced in pre-modern Japan during the period of national isolation.

Hallam and Ingold insisted on the importance of focusing on the process, not on the

formal resemblance, using the example of architects and builders. In the traditional Western idea, architects were considered more creative than builders because the latter's work seemed to be simply reproducing the architect's design. However, the process of construction could be also creative as builders improvise to reproduce the architect's design in an ever-changing environment.

The argument appears to be applicable to Nishiki-e. For example, these woodblock prints are designed by painters: E-shi who draw the preliminary sketch, which are subsequently inscribed in material by engravers: Hori-shi and dyed and printed by printers: Suri-shi. However, a closer look at their handworks reveals an interesting fact that engravers often chose appropriate woodblocks and added lines not depicted in the underpainting, and printers received the coloring instructions in the form of text (not a colored picture). This means that the process they undertake is not merely the reproduction of the painter's design, but creativity would be recognized in the process of adding details and textures which were not in the original design.

From this perspective, this paper focuses on the process of engraving and printing in Nishiki-e which were unnoticed behind the privileged painter or designer. Finally, it leads to clarify the creativity which differs from Western idea or the influence of the Japonism and also reconsider the Hallam and Ingold's model.

### **Shaping creativity through art and literature - The cases of Sin Saimdang, Han Kang and Suzy Lee**

Antonella Gasdia

The concept of "creativity" is often associated with the artistic and literary realms. These genres of expression seek to portray aspects of reality and give voice to the inner worlds of their creators as well as to the larger societal context. While art employs a more purely visual approach to imprinting emotions and moods on canvas, literature does so on paper. In some instances, this intent is combined with the representation of the unheard voices of society, including those of women. Throughout Korea's history, women have consistently been marginalized, silenced, and constrained by the limitations of Confucian ideology, which continues to influence social norms even during the contemporary era. However, creativity, in its various forms, has not only served as a "refuge" but also as a catalyst for the gradual evolution of women's empowerment within society. The goal of this study is to illustrate the evolutionary path of both artistic and literary creativity, tracing its origins with Sin Saimdang (1504-1551), Korea's first great female artist of the Chosŏn period, and continuing with Han Kang, a celebrated contemporary female writer, before concluding with the outstanding productions of Suzy Lee, a prominent contemporary illustrator. Each of them serves as a conduit for bridging the past and present. Moreover, it offers insights into the evolution of creativity across different forms and eras, with a particular focus on the role of creativity in the advancement of women's empowerment.

### **The modern metamorphosis: from monkeys and capybaras to the logic of everyday creativity on Chinese social media**

Leiyi Lin

When Franz Kafka wrote his novel "The Metamorphosis" and transformed Gregor Samsa into a huge insect, he might not have imagined that, over a century later, this

grotesque realism transforming humans into animals was widely practiced in the digital world in China. In the second half of 2023, a new genre of memes emerged on Chinese social media, pairing images of monkeys and capybaras with captions as a new way of everyday communication.

My research attempts to uncover the sociocultural reasons behind this internet culture by tracking the use of these memes on social media. First, by analyzing the captions netizens create in reproducing such memes, I identify several ways in which everyday life becomes the source for meme creation within the Chinese context. Second, by tracing the origins of these memes, I illustrate the relationship between these memes and the current social context in China, and explain why netizens have focused on animals like monkeys and capybaras instead of the more commonly used cute cats and dogs. In my view, the birth of these memes, or the cultural improvisation behind them, represents a seemingly cynical yet highly creative resistance to the power structures in everyday life. Finally, by analyzing the replies generated by the use of these memes in different scenarios, I examine whether there is a regional, cultural taste of creativity, and argue that creativity is situational.

### **Onisube: The Japanese Festival as a Poetic Act**

#### Guilherme Figueiredo

In the wake of aesthetics and romanticism, 'creativity' became a central artistic and personal virtue in the Western world. Within this tradition, creativity has been conceived as the highest manifestation and exaltation of subjectivity, insofar as the creative subject is capable of transcending established norms and collective forms of meaning, i.e., of being 'original'. Creativity is thus often associated with the dissolution, rupture, or reformation of established traditions, social institutions, and cultural patterns (Rosaldo, Smadar, & Narayan 1993: 5).

Drawing on my fieldwork in a major Shinto shrine in Japan, I take the Onisube (鬼すべ) as an ethnographic case study and argue that this festival (祭り) defies subjectivist and diachronically nonconformist notions of creativity in favour of communal and historically continuous (traditional) forms of creativity. The Japanese festival, and the Onisube in particular, provide an alternative way of conceiving creativity that is neither predicated on subjectivist/individualistic nor revolutionary/anti-traditional ideals, but that instead demands the dilution of the subject (無心) in the community and the 'pouring' of bodies into the ritual forms (Pilgrim 1989), binding the community synchronically and diachronically. However, far from being a crystallised practice, through the recognition of the importance of historically continuous modalities of production and action, this festival opens fertile spaces of interpretative possibilities that can adapt and correspond to contemporary issues and concerns. By "undergoing" (Ingold 2014) the processes of preparation and participation in this festival, communal and historical forms of meaning are cyclically enacted and continually brought into being. The festival is therefore a creative, poetic act, insofar as (1) it brings itself and its constitutive elements into existence; (2) through the enactment of its dramatic structure, it reveals and provides the local community with a sense of itself in the present and over time.

## Chicken Blood

Alberto Gerosa

First appearing as the collective Japanese morning training 'radio calisthenics', this Eastern Asian choreographic style was later exported to Taiwan in the 1960s, and ultimately to mainland China in the late 1970s. Today, this choreographic practice is the most practiced choreographic style in the world, with millions of mainland Chinese migrant workers creating and performing it each morning.

Its origin and practice challenges our common understanding of creativity. It is a common practice in many Japanese, Chinese and Taiwanese companies. It involves a series of exercises performed by employees at the start of the workday to promote physical well-being and energize workers.

A contemporary vernacular expression challenging the dichotomy between practicing artists and not artists, this choreography vocabulary hybridises leisure and personal growth with aesthetic concerns. Chicken blood and Radio Calisthenics boarder nationalism and re appropriate its forms into a narrative of empowerment, merging patriotism with self individuation. Rooted in the 'Shanzhai' concept, which aesthetically represents not only a valid interpretative key to understand Chicken Blood, but also the larger ecosystem of creativity in China today, this practice problematises the western individual-centric understanding of creativity, originality and authenticity.

Blurring the line of individuality as a basis to understand the creative act, as well as blurring the line of the practicing artist as the sole holder of creative agency, this practice is itself queer in its appearances.

We aim for a 20 minutes presentation, that first introduces the phenomenon of Chicken Blood, and then invites participants to try to create a micro choreography altogether, specific for the context of the Vanda conference. This method was used at the Easa conference, and at Tokyo University and it allows for participants to really feel the sensorial effect and emotional unexpected 'charge', helping to embody and meet our fieldwork pre rationally.