

# Introduction: Gender Dynamics and Connecting Comparisons

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Introduction

# Gender Dynamics and Connecting Comparisons

BY HILDA RØMER CHRISTENSEN, BETTINA HAUGE  
AND CANCAN WANG

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For a hundred years or more, *The Nightingale* and other fairy tales by Hans Christian Andersen have fascinated readers in China and Denmark and bound them together in a corresponding set of values and preoccupations. Not only do the tales make use of poetic, ironic and humorous means to make a strong claim for the value of social justice, which continues to feature strongly in both regions, but throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century the tales have also linked the vast empire of the east with the tiny kingdom of the north as imagined communities (Anderson 1983). In H. C. Andersen's eyes, China features as a refined land of porcelain, while Denmark is portrayed as a bucolic haven of peace. Beneath the polished surfaces, however, unruly and unjust social conditions prevail, and, according to H.C. Andersen, both societies stand in need of moral and ethical guidance. In both regions these tales have contributed to creating values and ethics for more than a century now,

and the ugly duckling and the nightingale have remained well-loved figures, sending the message that there is an answer to the evils of unjust and societal hierarchies and a hope for social transformation.<sup>1</sup>

Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China and Denmark share features that are still magical even though enacted in diverse global assemblages. In spite of major differences, both China and Denmark are countries in transition in terms of their new forms of market co-operation, of their global distribution of production and consumption and of the development of emerging structures of governance in the shape of the EU and global organizations such as the UN and the WTO. Moreover, both China and Denmark have strong records on gender equality; at the political level in most recent times they have signed international agreements on gender mainstreaming, launched at the Women's World conference in Beijing in 1995. Gender mainstreaming has since figured as a global equality strategy, requiring the formal integration of gender and equality in all public provisions and in the wider projects of modernization throughout the world.

This volume of *Women, Gender & Research* contains fresh research and addresses issues from Chinese, Danish and Nordic perspectives. The articles cover both well-established and new areas in the fields of family, welfare and equality, alongside emerging themes related to the gendering of corruption, consumerism and sustainability. Moreover, the volume addresses methodological and theoretical considerations in current global and comparative studies. The publication fills a gap in the field of gender and social studies in connecting comparative perspectives, and pursues gender dynamics as a vital theme in both Nordic and Chinese development. The focus is on recent and emerging gender dynamics in urban cultures in China and in Denmark. Many of the articles reflect on the similarities and the diffe-

rences between the two regions, and examine the gendered effects of the breaking up of older forms of collectivity into new practices of the self. What also binds them together is the underlying attempt at a genuine inclusion of gender dynamics in the modernization projects currently connecting east and west in hybrid assemblages that resemble the modern world.

#### CONNECTING COMPARISONS AND MULTIPLE MODERNITIES

Many of the subjects presented in this volume of *Women, Gender & Research* call for complex notions of global modernity and connectivity, which in turn invite reflection on experimental, interdisciplinary methodologies and research approaches. The concept of *connecting comparison* has been used convincingly in the historical analysis of gendered modernities in east and west; it finds expression in a methodology "that neither reads peculiar phenomena as deviations from an abstracted 'norm' nor one that measures such developments against those postulated by theories of inevitable modernization." (Weinbaum et al 2008: 4). Connecting comparisons have been pursued mainly as an empirically based approach, which suggests timelines of modernity as lateral and simultaneous, rather than evolutionary or static. The focus has been on how specific local processes condition each other and make up a challenge to abstract typologies such as modernity.

The aligned idea of modernity refers to the confluence of the cultural, social and political currents in modern society. So far, modernity has been associated mainly with western developments, with modernity staged as a particular cultural and existential current of western origin. Notably the idea of the public sphere as an ideal type of western democracy, and as a space where citizens can express themselves and demand their rights of the state has become a hall-

mark of modernity (Habermas 1962/1989, Calhoun 1992).<sup>2</sup> Moreover modernity has been celebrated as an awareness of what is new and cosmopolitan in modern urban life. Historical analysis has demonstrated how bourgeois men in particular but also some women took advantage of the ideals and liberated themselves through the new public city life in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. They enjoyed the momentary possibility of escaping constraints and limitations in education, art and culture and gradually also in politics. At the same time the dominant idea of the public sphere as the locus of modernity tended to transpose the private realm of home and domesticity into the 'other' of modernity. These divides have informed 20<sup>th</sup> century feminism both in the west and in the east, where domesticity and motherhood were often seen as barriers for women's emancipation, with the private home as a structural impediment for women's equality (Winther 2006, Christensen, 2009).<sup>3</sup> In Europe, such critical ideas of home and motherhood were fuelled by fascist ideology and practice in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including a conservative gender ideology that spurred highly discriminating practices. In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such dichotomized horizons have informed social research, and contributed to the marginalizing of home, family and domesticity in studies of society and urban modernity.<sup>4</sup>

While China is generally assumed to have been a late-comer and entered modernity only quite recently, new debates on globalization coupled with postcolonial concerns have spurred fresh ideas that track Chinese modernity as part of much longer and complicated processes. The Chinese-American literary scholar Lu Sheldon operates with the coming of Chinese modernity presented in a series of successive or overlapping 'modern' moments and besides with a Chinese modernity that stretches from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century

(Sheldon 2007: 1). This includes moments such as the incipient modernity of the late Qing Dynasty around 1900 as demonstrated in the era of empress Cixi (see book review in this volume). This was followed by the republican era and the capitalist semi-colonial modernity of the Chinese coastal cities from 2011, which also saw an emerging discussion of new family forms, of marriage, women's education and motherhood, as demonstrated in Yifei Shen's article in this volume. During the modernity of the communist revolutionary and socialist eras, which unfolded in the 1950s and 1960s, motherhood and domesticity tended to disappear from the public agenda after the launch of the People's Republic of China in 1949 (Hershatter 2004, Ko & Wang 2007). Marxist gender ideology held an exclusive focus on women's equality through productive work outside the home and contributed to downplaying the relevance of home and domesticity in public discourse. So, in spite of supposedly profound differences, cross-national and regional perspectives make visible the structural and ideological marginalisation of home and domesticity in both liberal and communist modernities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Spurred by other phenomena of the modern, such as the global and ever-increasing exchange of information, the movement of people around the world, and increased urbanization, the current period of late modernity in the west and of post-socialist modernity in China is marked by new norms and social forms. Being part of a global world may mean that norms and social forms are best captured by concepts that link to theories of modernity and global interfaces. Collier & Ong discuss the question of how we can study complex, abstract, mobile, dynamic phenomena in today's global context, and to this end they propose the notions of the New Social and of *global assemblages* (Collier & Ong 2005, Zhang & Ong 2008). While connecting

comparisons are useful for empirical, data-based analysis, the idea of global assemblages takes the data analysis a step further by connecting specifically to theories of modernity and global interfaces.

#### GLOBAL ASSEMBLAGES AND THE NEW SOCIAL

In the opening interview of this volume the Asian-American anthropologist Aihwa Ong argues for the use of bold analytical concepts rather than big and all-encompassing theories when approaching complex global phenomena. Global assemblages, according to Ong, are framed by disparate global and situated elements and co-produce a particular space, and this interplay crystallizes conditions of possibilities and outcomes, which do not follow a given formula or script drawn from a master model (Zhang and Ong 2008: 10). The idea of global assemblages in some ways bear a resemblance to the well-known notions of life politics and post-traditional society as proposed by the British sociologist Anthony Giddens.<sup>5</sup>

The complex notion of global assemblages is shown to be characterized by a particular 'global' quality, and refers to interfacing phenomena that are attractive, mobile, dynamic; at the same time such phenomena move across analytical borders and enable the reconstituting of 'society', 'culture' and 'economy' in their known or imagined forms. Global assemblages are made up of the processes whereby global forms are articulated in specific situations or territorialized, and as such they define new material, collective and discursive relationships. These global assemblages are "domains in which the forms and values of individual and collective existence are problematized or at stake in the sense that they are subject to technological, political, and ethical reflections and intervention." (Collier & Ong 2005: 12-13). The notion thus allows for studying hybrid phenomena

and cannot be reduced to its involved parts or to a single logic (Collier & Ong 2005: 17). Resonating with the characteristics of modernity, in the tensions often accompanying modern life in the global world, the notion itself contains an inner tension; where 'global' as an attribute implies something broad and encompassing, seamless and mobile, 'assemblage' indicates what is heterogeneous, contingent, unstable, partial and situated.

Several articles in this volume explore micro-histories that address themselves to the big questions of globalization in a "careful and limited manner" (Collier & Ong 2005: 12). They address *the new social*, which at some levels seems to link China and the west; the new social is made up of fresh and emerging techniques of self-government and governance from afar, and is an outcome of what may be called neoliberal governance. Many of the articles show how public and private practices and public interventions are becoming increasingly intermingled and how private choices and self-interest might in this way influence the direction of public discourse. Yet the articles not only investigate when features and practices are intrusive and when they can be seen as liberating; following Ong and Collier, the authors also seek to outline in what ways their data may add to an understanding of how "worlds are made and futures imagined" across regions, times and moments (Collier and Ong 2005: 9).

#### ARTICLES OF THIS VOLUME

In China, developments in urbanization, social mobility and the rise of a new middle class are taking place at a scale hitherto unseen; in this process new middle-class families are becoming a kind of laboratory of life in compressed modernity, producing new subjectivities and practices in the new social. The articles by Yifei Shen and Michala Hvidt Breengaard in this volume locate how these processes of moderniza-

tion are unfolding across the public and private spaces that form the new social. In the article “Hot Mums. Motherhood and Feminism in Post-socialist China” Yifei Shen focuses on ideals constructed by the media of the new smart and well-informed mother, the hot mums who break away from the traditional image of motherhood; at the same time these hot mums represent a complex negotiation between feminist subjectivity and cultural interactivity in current China. Michala Hvidt Breengaard traces a related but different discourse, the process of competent motherhood in the context of China’s one-child policy and the ongoing modernization processes, whereby new boundaries are drawn between competent and incompetent mothers. Breengaard demonstrates how class and generation are being reshaped and moulded into new structures of governance mediated by media and science. While well-educated mothers take centre-stage as examples of high competence, the older generations and rural, domestic aids are positioned as incompetent.

The Chinese examples of family and gender compare and contrast with new practices of involved fatherhood in the Danish and Nordic region. Anna Sofie Bach has studied a sample of Danish men in career families in her article “Between Necessity and Delight. Negotiating Involved Fatherhood among Career Couples in Denmark”. While these men and fathers appear as frontrunners of Nordic egalitarian family practices, their involvement turns out to be guided by a pragmatic motivation, namely the wish to reconcile family and work with emotional investments. The article contributes to ongoing discussions of what it means to be an involved parent and father – a vital discussion now emerging in new middle-class families in China and in the Chinese media.

Both new and old family practices form an integral part of the institutional set-up of welfare arrangements; they depend on

the particular relations between state, market and family and the wider political culture implicated in the idea of welfare regimes. In his article “Gender and Welfare Regimes Revised. Connecting Danish and Chinese Perspectives”, Peter Abrahamson outlines how Denmark and the Nordic countries have created elaborate welfare institutions and public support from cradle to grave. China has been marked by a more dramatic shift in the post-socialist period, when public funded or company related care facilities have been dismantled along with the *danwei* system, leaving care as a private concern of families and grandparents. Despite such differences, both historical and current, in their welfare regimes, both states today encounter parallel challenges when it comes to demographic patterns and an ageing society, with more elderly in need of support and care. As argued by Abrahamson, both countries are committed to the well-being of all citizens and universal welfare provision; it seems as if both China and Denmark are moving towards a welfare mix of private and public services where not only gender, but also class and age are seen as important.

Some of these perspectives are illustrated by the article “Chinese Women’s Family Status. Analysis of Chinese Decennial Surveys 1990-2010” by Jiehua Lu and Xiaofei Wang. This article focuses on important dimensions of women’s family status, not simply their general relations but also changes in domestic decision-making between spouses and time spent on domestic labour among men and women – including rural-urban differences. It points to “equal rights for both husband and wife” (Fu Qi Ping Quan, 夫妻平权) as the major pattern in domestic decision-making, yet, the rights of man is still larger than that of woman. Women are still the ‘main force’ in domestic labour, although the difference between time spent on domestic

labour by women and men has gradually narrowed.

In the article “Bringing Gender in. Women and Corruption in China”, Qi Wang and Dongchao Min seek to understand the role of gender in corruption in China. They outline different forms of women’s involvement as government officials, as well as of mistresses and wives or family members of corrupt male officials. Various theories of corruption are presented and a theory of chaotic capital and resource acquisition as a supplement to existing explanations.

In her essay “Death and my Ipad”, Cecilia Milwertz ponders upon the entanglements of Chinese workers and Nordic and Chinese consumers. After 25 years as a Danish researcher studying women in China, she argues for a relocation of the research perspectives through the concept of global assemblage and processes of interaction. This includes new and shared ways of defining the research object and also research collaborations between Nordic and Chinese scholars.

“The Lure of Car Culture in Post-socialist China” by Hilda Rømer Christensen focus on notions of gender and cars as located in both global and local assemblages and as implied in new conceptions of gender, class and nation. Moreover car culture is analysed as a site for the cultivation of bodily senses, of lifestyles and new moralities, while at the same time signifying new and critical social gaps related to class, gender and location. The lavishness of consumerism found in present-day car culture is set into relief by Nicolaj Vendelbo Blichfelt’s article: “Gendering Low-carbon Life among Retirees in Urban China”. The community of low-carbon activists seeks to alter everyday consumption practices and to form a global assemblage from below, a process through which a group of women come to the fore as role models. The low-carbon life campaign in Dongping Lane can be viewed as a site of

technological, political and ethical renegotiation of what it means to be a ‘proper citizen’ at the historical, political and economic intersection of the late reform era and the beginning of Chinese engagement with global climate change.

The final article “Reconstituting Orders after Neo-liberalism? The “Growth Fetish”, Gender and Environment in Sino-European Interchanges” by Hanne Petersen provides a critical statement of the shared commitment of capitalism and communism; the ‘growth fetish’, it is argued, has led to economic polarization with harmful consequences for the environment and for climate. Sustainable solutions to these challenges require transformations of (gender and environmental) orders, an increased awareness of earlier traditions and ‘fetishes’, and the development of new concepts and perceptions of the ‘proprietary’ nature of these practices and relations. Assembling – and sharing – experiences and experiments from different global contexts, be they social, economic, cultural, artistic, spiritual or hybrids of these forms, may provide new orientations of what decisions to take, what concepts to be guided by and/or where to go in both the east and the west.

Critical and explorative analysis of developments both in China and across the globe are also presented by the books reviewed in the final section. *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* by Leta Hong Fincher summarizes the position of women and gender equality in reform-era China. It takes single women as the starting point and reflects present-day debates on the Chinese media about (single) women. While celebrated for their educational and professional attainment, urban young women are stereotyped as ‘leftovers’ because of their unmarried status. This provides a basis from which to discuss issues such as gender expectation, domestic violence and property ownership.

Next we bring a review of the *Queer*

*Women in Urban China*, an ethnographic study of female same-sex subjectivity, intimacy and community in mainland China. Here the anthropologist Elisabeth Engebretsen discovers that many *lalas*, or Chinese lesbians, aspire to lead as normal a life as their heterosexual counterparts and reject or disclaim identity categories such as lesbian or homosexuality. This differs from other parts of the world where sexual minorities celebrate their freedom to be different and refuse to lead a double life. To claim that Chinese homosexual culture is bound to be different from western paradigms is, according to the reviewer, hardly convincing in a transnational world where the local and the global are increasingly intertwined.

The review section concludes with a presentation of *Fortunes of Feminism. From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*, by the well-known American feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser. Fraser's message is that feminists must give up the dangerous alliance with the market and instead form new alliances with other social forces defending social cohesion. It could here be asked whether the critique of the dangerous alliance between capitalism and feminism is primarily relevant to liberal US feminists or, indeed, whether there is still one feminist movement fighting together for social justice, or whether there are today many feminisms with different interpretations of gender justice?

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The team of authors of this special volume is made up of scholars who have in recent years been part of the lively academic exchanges between China and the Nordic region. The volume comprises papers deriving from recent Chinese-Danish-Nordic research collaborations: such as conferences and research workshops

featured in collaborations between Peking University in 2012 and the Nordic Center and Department of Sociology at Fudan University in 2013. Sino-Nordic conferences, summer schools, and seminars at both Nordic and Chinese Universities have also provided substantial input and inspiration for the volume.

This anthology is published in an English and a Chinese edition – this volume as a special issue of the research journal, *Women, Gender & Research*. The aim of having editions in two languages is to achieve an efficient channel for communicating and disseminating knowledge. Our hope is to address both a general international audience and gender and welfare research communities, particularly in China. Furthermore, such a dual edition may, in fact, illustrate ongoing global assemblages within the field of research.

Last but not least, we would like to convey our gratitude to those Chinese colleagues and to those institutions that generously contributed to these scholarly events and exchanges: The Department of Sociology and the Women's Study Center, Peking University; The Department of Sociology and the Nordic Centre at Fudan University. Our thanks also go to the Sino-Danish Center for Education and Research in Beijing, which contributed to the initial phases of events and co-operations. Finally, we would like to cordially thank the Department of Sociology, University of Copenhagen for financial support of this volume and for enduring support for Gender Dynamics initiatives.

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## NOTES

1. Hans Christian Andersen's first tales were translated into Chinese in 1914 and 1918 and since then have influenced Chinese writing for children and adults. Andersen's tales became even more popular during the Mao-era, (Guo 1993).
2. We use the term modernity and its more recent elaborations rather than related terminologies such as globalization, capitalism or modernization. The notion carries both chronological and conceptual dimensions, as coined, for example, by the French poet Baudelaire in 1864 in a well-known definition: "By modernity I mean the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent." (Delanty 2007) The search for a pure track of cosmopolitan modernity is still prevailing, see e.g. Lynn Pan: *Shanghai Style. Art and Design Between the Wars*, Joint Publishing / H.K.Ltd./ Hong Kong 2008.
3. Which resembles postcolonial criticism by e.g. Mohanty (1984), who criticized western feminist studies for marginalizing home and domesticity.
4. Another familiar strategy consisted in the up-scaling of separate roles and the cult of home and domesticity, developed as part of a strategy for maintaining empires in the east and the west in the first decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Middle-class women in the west and in the urban east saw this as a shortcut to equality between home and work. Schneider, Helen M. ( 2011): *Keeping the Nation's House. Domestic Management and the Making of Modern China*. UBC Press, Vancouver, Toronto 2011. More recently scholars have re-introduced the idea of home along cultural phenomenological lines. See e.g. Mallet, Shelley (2004): *Understanding Home: a critical review of the literature*. In *The Sociological Review*. Blackwell Publishing Oxford: 63-88, and Blunt, Alison & Dowling, Robyn (2006): *Home*, Routledge.
5. According to Giddens, everyday experiments both penetrate modern institutions and influence the tissue of day-to-day life. Not just the local community, but intimate features of personal life and the self become intertwined with relations of indefinite time-space extension. Anthony Giddens: "*Living in a Post-Traditional Society*" pp 58-59, here quoted from Ong 2005 :9.

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