

BOOK
REVIEWS

GENDERED FRAGMENTS

Ragnhild Lund, Philippe Doneys and Bernadette P. Resurrección (eds.): Gendered Entanglements: Revisiting Gender in Rapidly Changing Asia. 336 pages. NIAS Press. Price: £ 19.99.

Growing populations, expanding economies, political reforms, technological innovations. These are some of the terms that we associate with Asia today. Asia represents a realm of unknown potentialities, unforeseeable futures – the implications of which, we have realized, extent into a global reality that we are all part of. While such notions have entered into the common, western imagination, *Gendered Entanglements* avoids the pitfall of being dazed by these pervasive narratives. Evidently, this reality provides parts of the ethnographic and political backdrop of the book, but to its credit it manages to maintain its focus on the ways in which gender is operationalized in developmental projects and institutions across Asia.

Gendered Entanglements turns out to be an extensive collection of papers that offers a remarkable ethnographic richness. The book can thereby be read by anyone seeking to gain new and stimulating perspectives on a diversity of ethnographic settings. But the relevance of this book extends beyond this geographic context. The 12 chapters included in this work (along with an enlightening introduction by the editors) will resonate with wider ideas in the field of gender studies – although these ideas could also be further engaged with in the volume. Most of the chapters are replete with at once narrow and expansive meditations on a range of themes relating to continuities and changes in the way gender is understood and constructed in different ways across Asia.

The contributing authors come from varied disciplinary backgrounds (including sociology, political science and geography as well as anthropology), but in most of the papers it is detailed ethnographic or historical data that

form the base for discussion. As an anthropologist, I find several of the contributions in this volume invaluable in comprehending how gender can be perceived as multi-dimensional aspects of people's lives. This is especially the case in Noraida Endut's discussion of 'Syria court processes' in Malaysia, which is the stand-out paper of this collection. In a clearly argued chapter, Endut depicts the Islamic courtroom as a gendered space and provides an illuminating discussion of the ways in which gender dynamics permeate the legal system, often to the women's detriment. Other chapters successfully draw attention to cases whereby the gender-myths that are being perpetuated in development studies are translated into development practice where they exert an adverse effect. Considerations of gender may in fact have played an unhelpful role in constructing various ideas of development.

GENDER ON THE GROUND

There is a growing interest within the social sciences about the intersections of politics and development in Asia. Through its perspective on gender, *Gendered Entanglements* provides a novel perspective to this literature. The book argues that development work should be based on *transformative* approaches to gender. This means that rather than understanding gender one-dimensionally, the task will be to identify actual cultural, discursive, and political practices that create gendered inequalities on the ground.

By taking the reader to a range of diverse contexts (including court rooms, urban spaces, fish markets, post-disaster sites), the book addresses the emancipatory potential of gender as a category for social analysis. Based on the critical idea that gender studies has in some cases reinforced rather than challenged the inequalities that it sets out to examine, the effort that implicitly cross-cuts each of the contributions is to rethink gender in such a way that it comes to reflect the messy reality of Asia today, where gender is continuously

negotiated and subjected to change as part of various political discourses and development practices. Yet, rather than offering a collection of texts organized around an effort to unfold central questions, the chapters conjure an ethnographic montage, a series of juxtapositions of different realities.

While this allows the reader to explore new sides of what gender means in different parts of Asia, this is, arguably, also the weakness of *Gendered Entanglements*. The seeming reluctance towards engaging with analytical questions and the undeveloped theoretical framework makes the volume appear somewhat fragmented.

Throughout the book, and particularly in the final section, much ground is covered and the picture that emerges is necessarily complex and incomplete. The book moves quickly from topic to topic and while this could, in other anthologies, cause a general sense that one did not get quite enough time to digest each chapter, due to the thorough editorial work, this book in fact manages to maintain a steady pace that allows the reader to dive into each chapter. Yet, what I miss is the conversation between the texts – the “entanglements” that the title of the book gives promise to. As is often the problem with this type of anthologies, the ethnographic cases appear to have been picked haphazardly from innumerable potential cases across Asia. This constitutes an underlying weakness of the book when reading it cover to cover. Arguably, the book would have been strengthened by a more systematical, comparative effort.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

Perhaps, the most important accomplishment of this book is its insistence on allowing questions of gender to emerge while simultaneously allowing gender to remain unfixed. By showing how conceptions of gender is entangled with power structures, legal frameworks, etc., the book repeatedly reveals the limitations of relying on simple categorizations as a way to convey understanding of gender issues

in Asia. The authors insist that rather than having a fixed nature, gender is historically and spatially produced.

Nevertheless, the book falls short in two areas. First, it sets out to study processes of change through a focus on “global-local interactions and dynamics” and argues that this implies “considering ways in which globalization is at play in constructions of masculinity and femininity” (p. x), but it falls short when it comes to the first part of this gendered duality. In fact, masculinity is almost completely absent throughout the book, which has the implicit effect that “gender” comes to mean “female”. While this is unfortunate from a feminist perspective, it is also a missed opportunity since masculinity in Asia is an issue that still needs to be properly addressed in gender studies.

Second, there is, throughout the book, a strange unwillingness to draw properly on the vast literature that has attempted to deconstruct gendered, western categories. This is another missed opportunity as it could have provided a much-needed comparative context for putting the heavy, conceptual framework of past and present critical scholarship on gender into work within new, ethnographic settings.

This does not lessen the value of the individual chapters. While the book does not manage to weave together the various contributions into a coherent whole, most of the chapters are in themselves so convincing that I can only recommend everyone with an interest in gender and cultural change in Asia to read this anthology. Overall, the collection of papers demonstrates what it is possible to achieve when considering the ways in which the production of women’s gendered identities is complicit in creating gendered disadvantages. *Gendered Entanglements* is thereby poised to inspire future research by showing how the (ethnographic) study of gender in Asia can help to address and even recast critical concerns in relation to gender across the disciplines. It could, however, have made an even greater contribution to the field of gen-

der studies in general if the editors had made a greater effort to structure the contributions more explicitly around a more sophisticated framework – beyond the idea of the fluidity of gender. To its defense the individual chapters has moral as well as ethnographic value, which makes the book as a whole a significant contribution to the literature on the intersections of gender and development in Asia.

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GENDER GROWS IN THE FIELD

Cecilia Bergstedt: Cultivating Gender: Meanings of Place and Work in Rural Vietnam. NIAS Press, 2016, 228 pages, price: £ 18.99.

What is the relationship between people and the places they inhabit? How does gender inform the relation between what people do and where they do it?

Cecilia Bergstedt spent a year in the village of Lanx Khan, Vietnam, living with a local family of farmers. Having observed and interacted daily with the villagers, Bergstedt offers an in-depth account of the relationship between people and places. The main argument of the book is that human life and behaviour acquire meaning only to the extent that they are always situated in specific places; however, space and place are not simply backgrounds, which humans act upon (p.4). The relationship between space/place and people is mutually constitutive and, Bergstedt argues, always informed by gendered power relations.

Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s concept of “orientation” (Ahmed 2006) and Heidegger’s argument about dwelling (Heidegger 1971), Bergstedt shows that while dwelling is a fundamental way in which humans find and con-

struct meaning, “by doing different things in different places, men and women [are] oriented towards the world in gender-specific ways” (p.85).

GENDER AND DIVISION OF LABOUR

By looking at how men and women in Lanx Khan live and work in the fields, Bergstedt uncovers the ways in which ideas about gender, masculinity, and femininity directly shape and change the characters of specific places, such as the home, the community, and the field; and simultaneously, how developing and cultivating specific (gendered) skills in specific places also constructs individuals into men and women.

Farmers in rural Vietnam have very clear ideas about what kinds of tasks are to be performed by men and women respectively; ‘big work’ such as preparing the field for crops, is reserved for men, while women perform ‘small work’, which in the case of Vietnamese farmers consists of transplanting and harvesting rice. This gendered division of labour is considered “natural and inevitable” (p.129) by Bergstedt’s participants, like a materialization of natural gender differences. The supposed naturalness of gender differences does not just play out in the context of farming labour, but tinges other areas of people’s lives; far from being a difficult subject, gender roles were discussed openly and easily, and were a far less sensitive issue than more technical conversations about farmland ownership and management.

GENDER, STATE IDEOLOGY, AND THE MAKING OF PROPER CITIZENS

Bergstedt’s study is fascinating in that she provides a thorough contextualisation that sheds light on the role of the state (and the Communist Party) in steering the way male and female citizens are supposed to relate to farmland and residential land (p.15). The historical and ideological background in this book illuminates clearly how the state,

through agricultural and land reforms, aimed not only at finding new ways to cultivate the land, but also and crucially at how to cultivate proper Vietnamese men and women. One important finding in Bergstedt’s study relates to the effectiveness of state-led reforms: while the Party has been relatively successful in ‘degendering’ residential land, meaning that the management of houses and residential properties would be split rather evenly between men and women, when it comes to farmland, a gendered division of labour remains prevalent and integral to the maintenance and meaning of rural communities (p.198).

One aspect that emerges throughout the book, but could have been given even more prominence is the significance of the idea of cultivation: “cultivating gender” is a captivating expression, and one that suggests how social practices and norms are not only a limitation to individuals’ possibilities, but they also, and crucially, involve a constant project of learning and carefully cultivating gender-specific skills, ways of speaking, and moving about. Thus, the ways in which one becomes a man or a woman can only really be understood within specific contexts that are not only cultural and spatial, but – I would add – also temporal: the making of appropriately gendered subjectivities is also critically informed by the passing of time and the rhythm of farming seasons.

CULTIVATING GENDER, CULTIVATING MORALITY

Another important contribution of this book is the focus on the link between work, gender, and morality (see Rydström 2003). Bergstedt shows that “proper” moral subjects in Vietnamese society are not only cultivated and formed through following socially accepted gendered norms, but specifically through specific work activities that must be performed in specific ways by men and women (p.146).

While Bergstedt pays attention both to

masculinity and femininity, what emerges clearly and elegantly through this work is how the gendered division of labour is never equal. Neither is the dwelling capability of women: women's relation to a place appears to be contingent on the labour they put into it, since patrilineal and patrilocal rules mean they do not bring land to the household upon marriage.

Cultivating Gender is a neatly written, accessible book that will appeal to a vast range of scholars and disciplines, from anthropology, to gender studies, critical labour studies, and human geography.

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- Rydström, H. (2003): *Embodying Morality: Growing Up in Rural Northern Vietnam*. University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu.

MEDIA, FOOD AND GENDER

Jonatan Leer & Karen Klitgaard Povlsen (ed.): Food and Media: Practices, Distinctions and Heterotopias. Routledge, 2016, 211 pages. Price: £ 74.99.

This book aims to demonstrate that contemporary food studies should pay more attention to the significance of media (p.1). It is argued that food scholars in the areas of cultural and social studies need to acknowledge the role of media use in the development of food preferences and practices, the

negotiation of taste regimes and the construction of identities, as well as ways in which media reflect, challenge or transform social and cultural processes. The book is one of a series planned by Routledge entitled 'Critical Food Studies', all of which appear to be devoted to neglected topics. There is therefore good reason to welcome the advent of this particular volume.

The focus throughout the book is upon food consumption in domestic settings. Occasional reference to food production, processing, distribution or marketing is made, but this is done from a consumer perspective highlighting the symbolic functions of food rather than its materiality. This is a legitimate – if narrow – focus, traditionally shared by many social scientists within the field. The volume comprises an introduction by the editors, an epilogue by Kathleen LeBesco and Peter Naccarato (authors of *Culinary Capital*, 2012), and ten chapters divided into two parts.

FOOD AND GENDER IN THE MEDIA

Part I (Food practices in the media) presents six contributions, in each of which gender emerges as a central category of analysis. Two explore negotiations of masculinities – in TV commercials in the USA targeting men on the subject of weight loss, and in a popular cooking show on Danish television featuring two brothers (*Spise med Price*). Two analyse constructions of feminine identities with particular reference to food. Topics regard the challenges encountered by 19th century British settlers in Canada as documented in books and letters written by two sisters, and those negotiated by Michelle Obama while pursuing her campaign to combat childhood obesity. It is a central point of the latter that the First Lady was not only confronting ambivalent attitudes towards power in the hands of women, but also towards the idea of power in the hands of black people. Differences between the roles adopted by or accorded to men and women are the focus of two case

studies. One compares the culinary regimes promoted in Denmark through the medium of cookbooks authored by women and men respectively in the decades following World War II, while the other examines the roles typically accorded to men and women in so-called 'campaigning culinary documentaries' made for television. The format in this case is one in which a male celebrity chef sets out to solve a food crisis, while women in their role as poorly skilled or unmotivated housewives represent the obstacles to be overcome. It is a central point of this analysis that the food practices of working-class women are targeted as being particularly problematic.

MEDIA USE AND FOOD PRACTICES

Part II (Practices of food and media) includes four somewhat more disparate contributions based upon social scientific methodologies. One qualitative study explores cross-media use with particular regard to food and health issues. Another compares food practices as a feature of 'mothering' among Pakistani Danes, who have been exposed to a public health campaign focusing on nutrition, and among Danish women who subscribe to a lifestyle magazine featuring food topics. A third reports the results of focus groups comprising children in two age-groups, who were divided into teams charged with designing a media campaign that would either argue in favour of or against a particular item of food. The only contribution based on quantitative data examines cross-media user patterns among German children, supplemented by a qualitative study of the ways in which food content is presented in their favoured media.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF MEDIA STUDIES TO FOOD STUDIES

As a sociologist working in the area of sociology of food, this reader was fully convinced of the need to incorporate media representations and media use into her area of research before reaching the end of Part I. Kjær's de-

lineation of the path negotiated by Michelle Obama on her journey from relatively low to impressively high approval ratings (p.62-77) is a particularly interesting case study, which is also elegantly structured and argued. The same can be said of Leer's analysis of the construction of a 'homosocial heterotopia' when cooking together is approached by the brothers Price in a setting from which women are excluded (p. 110-125). Other topics, such as gendered practices with respect to weight loss or class-blindness on the part of those who design nutritional campaigns are already familiar themes to social researchers in this field. The selection of a wider range of topics therefore and, not least, a wider range of media would have been appreciated. For instance, an analysis of consumers as co-producers of food content on social media might have been expected to throw new light on relationships between food practices and media use.

The editorial work on this volume could have been more stringent in its demands that theoretical considerations and empirical results be more clearly related to each other, and that accounts of methodology should be precise with respect to such issues as sample size and composition (cf. pp. 134-5 and p.153). It is also regrettable that publishers seemingly no longer provide thorough language editing and proof-reading services, such that misnomers and minor errors could be eliminated and standard usage imposed on such matters as whether 'media' or 'medium' is a singular noun.

The editors' introduction highlights practice theory, developments of the concepts of 'distinction' and 'taste' since Bourdieu, as well as Foucault's concept of 'heterotopia' as aspects that structure connections between its contributions. This claim fails to convince the present reader. Halkier does provide a concise account of practice theory (p. 150-2), and Leer both defines the concept of 'heterotopia' and employs it in a consistent manner (p.110-23). However, I am left with an impression that a suggestion to incorporate the

concept of ‘heterotopia’ when relevant has been made to several contributors, who appear to have made heroic attempts to do so in ways that fail to be clear or consistent with each other. Perhaps it would have been more fruitful to consider some recurring points on which the empirical results of these studies do supplement each other. For example, reasons why gender emerges as an ubiquitous presence in these analyses is worthy of further elucidation, as indeed are questions about when, why and for whom food practices emerge as projects of caring-for-self, caring-for-others or caring about ‘big’ issues such as animal welfare, environmental sustainability or obesity.

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REFERENCE

· Naccarato, Peter & LeBesco, Kathleen (2012): *Culinary Capital*. Berg, London and New York s. 115

PH.D.-DISSERTATION-NOTICE

Line Henriksen: *In the Company of Ghosts – Hauntology, Ethics, Digital Monsters*

In the Company of Ghosts’ explores French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s ‘hauntology’ through the lens of digital monsters and feminist theory.

Hauntology – a pun on ‘ontology’ and ‘haunting’ – offers an ethics based on responsibility towards that which cannot be said to fully exist, yet has an effect on our everyday lives nonetheless. Like the figure of the ghost, such undecidable existences are neither absent nor present, here nor gone, of the past or the future. In other words: they haunt.

By engaging with hauntology through contemporary stories of digital monsters – such as *The Curious Case of Smile.jpg*, *Welcome to Night Vale* and *Mushroom Land TV* – the thesis discusses how such troubling hauntings might be imagined, and what it means to think an ethics based on responsibility towards the undecidable.

By: Tema Genus, Linköping University

The defence took place: 13.05.2016

Opponent:
Professor Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, Central Michigan University

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PH.D.-DISSERTATION-NOTICE

Verena Lenneis: *The work, life and recreational physical activity of female cleaners*

This article-based PhD thesis explores the recreational physical activity (PA) participation of female cleaners – an occupational group mainly consisting of minority ethnic women from non-western countries. Using participant observation and semi-structured interviews, I gained insights into their experiences and challenges related to participation in a worksite fitness programme; their work, family and everyday lives; their previous experiences with PA; and their health-related knowledge, opinions and practices. The study showed that most women struggled with the demands of a physically exhausting job and an extensive ‘second shift’ at home. In addition, (lack of) previous experience of sport

and PA had a decisive influence on their current practices. I conclude that health policy and initiatives targeting cleaners or other marginalized groups must pay specific attention to structural factors such as the organization of the labour market and the gendered division of work.

By: University of Copenhagen, Department of Nutrition, Exercise and Sports

The defence took place: 14.11.2016

Committee/opponents:

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