

Reconstituting Orders after Neo-liberalism?

The “Growth Fetish”, Gender and Environment in Sino-European Interchanges

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ABSTRACT

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This article seeks to bring together aspects regarding issues of gender, legal pluralism, ecofeminism, sustainability, and globalization. I have been inspired by increasing interaction with interdisciplinary researchers in Denmark and China working on gender dynamics in a globalized and Asianized world, as well as by an interest in art as a source of understanding and expressing communal norms, values and conflicts. The article reflects upon the links between the high value of economic growth in both regions and art and artistic installations, which express increasing concern about the consequences of growth, amongst other things for economic inequality and sustainability. Linking and assembling such critical concerns, practices and expressions might be a way of approaching a reconstitution of global and local orders, including ambivalent and uncertain gender orders in the near future.

KEYWORDS

Growth, neoliberalism, gender, environment, art

The American environmental historian John McNeill has discussed what he calls the role of “big ideas” since 1900 (McNeill 2005). In his view the big ideas of the twentieth century are *nationalism*, *communism* and what he calls the “*growth fetish*”, which he understands as a shared and central ideological commitment of both capitalism and communism.

This was a flexible and seductive creed that appealed to almost everyone in power. That is because economic growth hides a multitude of political sins. Populations would put up with massive corruption, vast inequalities, or heavy-handed surveillance states (and in unhappy cases all three at once) if they believed that in the near future they would be materially better off than at the moment. (McNeill 2005:17)

The growth fetish may not (necessarily) be gendered, but the masculine dominance (Bourdieu 1999) of the institutions and power centres of politics, law and economics which support it were considerable in the twentieth century. However, we are also witnessing reflections upon and perhaps even challenges and changes to the hegemonic (western) masculinity. Combining this with the existence of diverse masculinities globally, we might expect implications not only for local gender relations, but also for relations between humans and nature more generally (Petersen 2009: 106; see also Petersen 1997).

Chinese and western masculinities differ in several ways (Louie 2002) which may have an impact on the reconstitutions of future gender and environmental orders. Louie introduces the concept of *wen-wu*, which he explains approximately as “cultural attainment – martial valour”, indicating that Chinese masculinity has a dual approach that recognizes both biology and culture. This article will focus as much

upon masculinity and masculine gender and agency as upon femininity and female gender in relation to reflections and (artistic) criticisms of growth fetishes.

The present era of the “growth fetish” is perhaps also one of a certain value dualism and confusion. Female politicians in the Nordic countries and Europe generally have been active in both nationalist and environmental movements and politics. “Men engaged with environmental politics cannot avoid gender politics as defined by feminism, whatever their personal histories,” writes the well-known author Raewyn Connell about Australia (Connell 2010). This also goes for men in the environmental movement in the Nordic countries, where men also make up the majority of the constituency for nationalist movements.

In the twentieth century there was a tendency to essentialize women and their (privileged) relationship to nature. At the end of the century, issues of justice (including gender justice) were highlighted more. In her article, “Ecofeminism in the 21st Century”, Susan Buckingham stresses that women are still “on the margins of formal decision making” (2004:155), which sometimes leads to their organizing less formal expressions of political protest. Along the same lines, Connell writes that specific groups of men still “control most of the resources required to implement women’s claim for justice”, and that the age of globalization is also witnessing a growing polarization among men worldwide (Connell 2005).

The promise and possibility of growing consumption choices were no doubt experienced as a relief for many or most former east Europeans and Chinese, including women. But the collapse of communism also went hand in hand with a loss of earlier publicly provided care facilities for children and the elderly, which clearly had gendered consequences. As the following examples

will show, globalization increased economic polarization across the genders and among women, as demonstrated in this description of female Chinese legislators:

A leather belt from Hermes priced at almost \$1,000 — nearly a year's salary for the average Chinese farmer. A bright pink, \$2,000 trouser suit from Emilio Pucci. A red snake-skin Celine handbag that costs \$4,500. These weren't items at a fashion show, but luxury goods spotted on delegates hurrying to China's annual legislative assembly sessions. The casual toting of such exorbitantly expensive clothing and accessories illustrates China's ever-widening wealth gap. And it also underpins claims that the country's legislative body — more or less a rubber stamp for government policy — is becoming a “rich man's club”. (Lim 2012)

At the beginning of her term in 2011, the first female prime minister in Danish history and the leader of the Social Democratic Party, Helle Thorning Schmidt, was often called “Gucci-Helle” because of her fancy for elegant and expensive bags and clothing. But perhaps wealth and corruption are more provocative in female (socialist and communist) leaders?

The small Nordic countries have more recent and stronger experience of top female political representatives and leaders than China. However, as a consequence of neo-liberalism everybody, regardless of (gender) identity and affiliation, has been strongly targeted by advertising focusing on (increased, changed and ‘green’) consumption and performance.

RE-MEASURING BEYOND GROWTH IN A PLANETARY CONTEXT?

The vanishing importance of not only industrial society, but also its knowledge forms and social organizations and institutions, has led to the development of a new (and so far weak) field of economics —

‘happiness’ economics.¹ The inspiration for this has come from the Kingdom of Bhutan (Petersen 2011) and has spread, among other ways, via a *Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress to the French Government (2009)*, written by Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and Jean-Paul Fitoussi. They write:

In this time of crises, when new political narratives are necessary to identify where our societies should go, the report advocates a shift of emphasis from a “production-oriented” measurement system to one focused on the well-being of current and future generations, i.e. toward broader measures of social progress.

Also in 2009, two British doctors published a book called (at first) *Spirit Level*. Since then they have created an Equality Trust and a website, where they wrote in a similar vein that “(t)he rich developed societies have reached a turning point in human history. Politics should now be about the quality of social relations and how we can develop harmonious and sustainable societies” (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010).²

The Chinese environmental historian, Bao Maohong, has written that the model of extensive economic growth has created both non-environmental and non-economic problems such as a widening gap between east and west and the “increasing impact of *farmers without soil, income, and job* or social stability. In short, China's mode of economic growth has resulted in widespread ecological destruction and environmental degradation” (Maohong 2010: 102). In this article Bao Maohong also refers to a new development index to be developed in the UK, the “Measure of Domestic Progress”, which will compensate for inadequacies of economic indicators.

These relatively recent discussions of new methods for measuring well-being or

domestic progress reflect the fact that problems of social inequality and unsustainable development, pollution and climate change are returning to the political agenda after the financial crisis in 2008, and that they are not local or national problems but common global problems. Among the fields and voices which has reflected on these complex emerging challenges is the field of art, which has traditionally been concerned with giving voice to (a complexity of) values, and which has also often been open to multiple interpretations (Petersen and Mehdi 2014).

CULTURAL INSTALLATIONS CRITICIZING GROWTH AND CONSUMPTION

Carolyn Merchant, who has written several early and important books on women and nature, such as *The Death of Nature* (1980), also wrote that “a society’s symbols and images of nature express its collective consciousness. These images of nature appear amongst others in art” (Merchant 1989:19). One of the areas, apart from research, where we *may* find signs of a changing and perhaps sustainable masculinity is in *art*, which I will discuss using a range of selected art works made by Chinese and Danish artists.

In 2007 the Danish art museum Louisiana showed an impressive exhibition of Chinese art, the economic boom in China having been followed by a strong interest in Chinese art and the Chinese art market. For instance, in the fall of 2011 Louisiana planned an exhibition of new pieces of art by Chinese artist and political activist Ai Wei Wei. Due to his arrest it turned out to consist mainly of earlier works, but several other art events and encounters have taken place in recent years.

Social and cultural criticism of economic and political developments has often been expressed through art forms. In March 2014 the Museum of Art in Public Spaces

(Køge Skitsesamling) organized a seminar on “*Art Caught in the Crossfire: Conflict and Negotiation in Contemporary Urban Spaces*.” The museum was at the same time hosting an exhibition of “Chinese global art” by Wang Qingsong called *Follow You*, consisting of staged megaphotography that was particularly critical of the Chinese school system.

Interest in the seminar was overwhelming, and it had to be relocated to larger premises. Belgian professor of political theory Chantal Mouffe, who has been regarded as a post-Marxist scholar, spoke about the role of critical and agonistic art in the public space. Among other things she mentioned the central role of advertising for consumption, as neoliberalism needs to permanently mobilize desires to increase consumption, as well as requiring to develop a new subjectivity. Interestingly the seminar had a strikingly skewed female-dominated gender composition, with an audience which was 85 % female and 60 % of female speakers. This could be due to traditional middle-class female interest in culture and the arts. Could it perhaps also indicate a certain ambivalence among (some) women towards consumer society?

Similar concerns are voiced by Danish activist, art professor and professional sculptor, Bjørn Nørgaard, who since 2002 has co-operated with several Chinese artists and participated in solo and group exhibitions in both China and Denmark. His first visit took place in 2002, when he was invited to participate in the 1st China International Ceramic Fair in the ceramic city of Foshan south-west of Guangzhou. He has returned to Foshan a number of times and in 2008 became a guest professor at the Dehua Ceramics College in Foshan, as well as guest professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. In 2007 he created an artistic “performance” called *Sisyphus Meets Confucius* at the Danish Cultural Institute, dARTex in Beijing.³ The naked artist himself dragged 1½ tons of clay,

plaster, gravel and salt up a mountain and then rolled a big block of stone over the mirrors of narcissism, finally making tea accompanied by a reading of texts by Confucius. Apparently the Chinese audience was very moved by the event, partly because of his nudity, which symbolized the naked sculpture from antiquity, from which we also know the Greek myth of Sisyphus. But according to Nørgaard the choice of material also influenced the spectators. Nørgaard describes his action as a "sculpture in time":

It is primarily a visual and not a literary expression. This is important, because it means that it is up to the public itself to interpret the images, which are performed. In reality it is a sculpture I am producing, but instead of it being a sculpture cast in bronze or carved in stone, it is a sculpture performed in time.

According to Nørgaard (and others) culture and the market today are mixed. We have gradually developed a common understanding of which brands are in, and which material goods are worth striving for:

There is a danger that the market in principle is a pure material mechanics, the market does not care provided only it sells, no matter whether it is this or that, and therefore the market has a tendency to homogenize everything...

Nørgaard leaves it to the audience to interpret his "sculpture", but he also wants the spectator to consider whether globalizations and cultural encounters aim to make us more homogenized, or to teach us to respect differences and learn from them. The question for Nørgaard is how cultures may communicate and develop together rather than against each other.

The image below is from an exhibition called *My Chinese Friends*, shown at Galleri Susanne Ottesen in Copenhagen in 2007,

where Nørgaard and a number of Chinese artists showed works that were critical of market culture. The pig is one of the highly appreciated animal symbols in the Chinese zodiac, and it is related to *yin*, often also considered a female and passive principle. The pig is also one of the biggest Danish export products in general, and Denmark produces about 25 billion pigs per year (Petersen 2012). A western interpretation of the sculpture may read into it a fascination with wealth, reproductive and sexual potential and female-animal power, as well as ambivalence and perhaps rejection of all these elements. A Chinese interpretation might reveal other ambivalences. Other presentations at the same exhibition showed sculptures (re)presenting greed and gluttony.



Photograph by author, December 12, 2007⁴

In the beginning of 2014 the "installation" *Waste Not* by the Chinese artist Song Dong – and not least his mother, Zhao Xiang Yuan – was shown in Aarhus, Denmark, as part of a group exhibition called **Against the Idea of Growth, Towards Poetry** [*Or, How to build a Universe that doesn't fall apart two days later*], presented by Kunsthal Aarhus. The installation in Aarhus was intended to reflect

an increasingly complex world where "all things are connected as part of the wider system", thus broadening our understanding of contemporary art and its relationship to other disciplines... Waste and debt reflect the larger realities and ecological consequences of the desire for endless growth and [the] accumulation of objects. (Systemics #3, Catalogue).

I first learnt about this installation during a visit to the 798 Art Zone in Beijing in 2009, when I bought a newly published book by Wu Hung on the installation, Zhao Xiangyuan, and Song Dong (Hung 2009). The book was an encounter with an artistic but also highly personal reflection on the dramatic changes from the establishment of the People's Republic of China, and on the considerable material growth witnessed by very many Chinese since Mao's death in 1976 and Deng Xiaoping's Four Modernizations, as well as the "one child policy" begun in the late 1970s, which strongly influenced both family life and society.

Since Beijing, the installation has been displayed in Tokyo in 2005 and later at different international venues in New York, London, Vancouver and Sydney. When I finally managed to see it in Aarhus, Denmark, in February 2014, it had arrived in fifty crates from Moscow. The first section in the book on *Waste Not* is entitled "About *Waste Not*: Things, Memory and Family Ethics", and describes the installation as "an enormous art installation made of over ten thousand of worn, broken, and occasionally unused objects, the majority of which would be considered garbage in any other situation." However, the objects were united "by a set of qualifications and associations, including their practical, emotional and moral implications ..." (Hung 2009:2). The objects (had) all belonged to Zhao Xiangyan, the mother of the artist Song Dong, but in this installation she was really the "artist" herself. According to Wu Hung she attests in her memories that for a long time she was driven solely by poverty and insecurity to save all these things. However, this initial motive gradually changed into keeping them for the sake of memory. "A number of factors, including China's economic development, social and political transformation, her children growing up, her own retirement, and the death of her husband, contributed to this change" (Hung 2009:11).

Wu Hung conceptualizes the installation as an autobiographical narrative in the form of an assemblage of things. This qualification of the work is based on two factors. The first concerns the personal nature of its materials and their strong emotional quality. Indeed, before their transformation into an art installation, these objects had little meaning to anyone except for the person, who had prevented their otherwise understandable obliteration. But to Xiangyuan, these were the most precious things in the world save her family. To her, every piece in the assemblage has a past, a present, and an imagined future. Each piece has a story, which she knew in amazing detail and clarity... Each piece is connected to a particular moment in her life, and in turn associated with a person or persons with whom she had an intimate relationship... They acquired their *materiality* – as proven evidence for Xiangyuan's association with them – through their collective existence. What they prove is a person's life-long struggle to survive and her enormous love for her family. (Hung 2009:13-14)

GLOBAL LINKS, RHIZOMES AND ASSEMBLAGES

The term "assemblage" was used in Deleuze and Guattari's demanding book *A Thousand Plateaus* (originally from 1980), where they argue against root metaphors and hierarchical understandings and in favor of a "horizontal" rhizomatic understanding of links, influences and impacts, thus introducing a conceptual framework which is perhaps becoming more and more useful in a globalized era.

Swedish/post-Yugoslavian legal scholar Merima Bruncevic uses Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of "rhizome" and "assemblage" together with the concept of the "commons" (which has a specific understanding in Swedish as "Allemansrätten") to argue in favor of *sharing* and to

describe law not as a body but instead as an

assemblage, an abstract machine, without organs, and jurisprudence as a rhizomatic movement that exists not due to, but through, paradigm shifts. As such it does not represent, or reproduce reality, it envisions it, creates it! (Bruncevic 2014: 370-371)

Stephen Collier and Aihwa Ong discuss “global assemblages” and anthropological problems in a book from this century, where they write that

As a composite concept, the term “*global assemblage*” suggests inherent tensions: global implies broadly encompassing, seamless and mobile; assemblage implies heterogeneous, contingent, unstable, partial and situated (Collier and Ong 2005:9, 11, 12).

In the interview with Aihwa Ong in this journal, she says that the “advantage of a global assemblage frame is that gender politics are not understood in a sociopolitical vacuum, but analyzed as emerging and changing within a particular global situation” (Ong, this issue).

In the installations and art works described above, tragedy, emotions and memory became key elements of the installations. The experiences of social and psychological breakdown, of dramatic and rapid change and of subsequent generation gaps are similar to experiences I encountered during a decade from 1995-2006, when I first lived and worked in Greenland, and later worked ‘trans-atlantically’ from Copenhagen. Many Greenlandic people also had generationally specific and very different experiences of rapid and not seldom painful changes during the twentieth century.

Wu Hung describes how the installation *Waste Not* provoked very emotional reactions. This was also the case for some of the elderly male Danish spectators I witnessed at the exhibition in Aarhus, as well as for myself. My own visit took place as part of a family visit with my husband, my brother

and his family on the day of my late father’s birthday, which reminded us of the experience of his frugality, and his practice of saving and repairing things. For Europeans who grew up between the world wars or a few years after the end of WWII, the experience of insecurity and poverty is not that far away – and for the younger generation the questioning of consumer society has come back since 2008, as the Danish staging of the installation demonstrated.

Song Dong comments on the issue of consumption in an interview in the book by Wu Hung:

when facing rapid social changes and a fast-paced lifestyle, people lack the necessary mental grounding. When material life reaches such an unimaginable importance, the lack of a spiritual life becomes a social malady. In the early 1990s the pervasive worship of money concealed people’s spiritual void, and consumption subsequently became the image of society’s advancement and development [...] This work, in fact, is about anti-consumption. *It blurs identity*. Consumption means to buy in order to be used later. To my mother, all miscellaneous things might be used in the future, so she saves them... For example, the soaps are already as hard as rocks and can’t be used anymore, but she still keeps them. My mother is anti-consumption. Her life basically is about zero consumption... (Hung 2009: 176, 179, emphasis in original)

Collier and Ong refer to decision-making in a chapter on “global assemblages”, writing “(i)n an environment of massive complexity and uncertainty, in which policy choice cannot be simply data-driven, a series of highly personalistic factors, ethical dispositions, and bodily states – ‘hunches,’ ‘intuitions,’ ‘feelings,’ stomachaches – come to assume a central role in actual decisions” (Collier and Ong 2005:14).

In a period of rapid social, environmental and global change and disintegration of earlier institutions, structures, and relations

(local and religious communities, churches, trade unions, parties, belief systems, ideologies and families), both popular culture and fusions of “high” and “low” cultural expressions may become temporary sites and objects for commercialization, as well as for subversive criticism and reflective practices on dramatic change. In modernity the cultural sector and the art sphere have been as male dominated as any other societal sector. In any case, the critical expressions channeled through these sectors may reflect broader experiences of emotions, tensions, and concerns across genders and generations.

“Assembling” examples, experiences, and perhaps even emotions and reflections in order for individuals and collectives to be able to act and react in a global context may to a certain extent pose similar challenges to Nordic and Chinese communities in this world. Modernity has become old-fashioned, and its ways and concepts of sense-making and understanding are no longer appropriate. “New” ways or “old” traditions and concepts may have to be (re)invented and (re)considered.

RECONSTITUTING GENDER, INTERSPECIES, VALUE AND ‘PROPERTY’ RELATIONS?

Although the imperial system has been abolished and China has changed enormously in the modern era, the father-son relationship still dominates Chinese society, which remains essentially patriarchal. (Hung 2009:54)

In China the preference for sons has been accentuated over the last generation since the implementation of the population policy known as the ‘one child policy’, because it is sons in particular who have inter-generational obligations to take care of their elderly parents. In all cultures with similar patriarchal traditions this has had consequences in relation to property ownership. General economic inequality will often lead to gendered economic inequality. This was

highlighted by law professor Ma Yinan from Peking University at a joint Nordic-Sino workshop in August 2012:

Due to the fact that both genders master different social resources, a seemingly equal and neutral policy benefits men more when launched. Take real estate registration, for example: couples are used to register the family’s real estate under the name of one of them, and few would bother to handle a co-ownership registration. It may lead to damage to one party because of the behavior of selling the house by the other party.⁵

Before the twentieth century, political and economic rights for women were very limited in both Asia and Scandinavia. Female property ownership was and is still very limited and uneven globally, and as the review of Leta Hong Fincher’s book *Left-over Women* in this issue indicates, a resurgence of gender inequality in this respect is also visible in China. The concept of property changed in the transition from feudal societies to industrial societies, whether capitalist or communist. It is again challenged and contested in many respects due to technological and social changes in relation to immaterial rights, because of consequences of climate change and perhaps also because of its gender injustices.

Industrial society, both communist and capitalist, gave rise to a gender order with a focus on the state, the patriarchal family and private and individual property, as Engels discussed in his famous book, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (from 1884).

Women – and many other living beings – have never really fitted into the model of the rational individual “economic man”, upon whom neo-liberal economic theory is based. Actually this theory has scarcely cared about the role of women in the economy. In 2012 the young Swedish economist and journalist Katrine Kielos published a book with a title which in translation

reads as “The Only Gender”. Having worked as a journalist during and after the financial crisis, she was intrigued by the complete lack of gender perspectives in the economic analysis of the crisis. When analyzing neoliberal economic theorists, especially the work of Adam Smith, she found that he hardly mentions gender issues, even though the “invisible hand” which put the food on his table on a daily basis was his mother’s, with whom he lived until her death, when she was over ninety (Kielos 2013). Other authors have commented on the remarkable absence of concern with gender and women in Smith’s work (Harkin 2013).

Ong claims that “contemporary Chinese art reconfigures the global” (Ong 2012). The present era is experiencing a daunting need for a rethinking of theories, concepts and forms of knowledge regarding the economy, property, values and relations, as well as for the reconstituting of social and cultural relations between the genders and between gendered humans and non-human species, in order to be able to contribute to a stable, peaceful and harmonious global order. Art and artistic expressions may contribute to this process of rethinking, revaluing and reconfiguring plural global relations and orders in interaction with other forms and developments of knowledge.

SUMMARY

The shared commitment of capitalism and communism to the growth fetish has led to economic polarization and has had harmful consequences for the environment and climate. These interrelations are critically addressed in artistic representations of Chinese and Nordic artistic expressions and interactions. Sustainable solutions to these challenges require transformations of (gender and environmental) orders, increased awareness of earlier traditions and “fetishes”, and the development of new concepts and understandings of the “proprietary” nature of these practices and relations. Assembling

– which involves sharing – experiences and experiments from different global contexts, be they social, economic, cultural, artistic, spiritual or hybrids of these forms, may provide “hunches” or support emotionally grounded orientations of what decisions to take, what concepts to be guided by and/or where to go.

NOTES

1. In Denmark, research in this field has been carried out by, among others, Prof. of Economics, Peder J. Pedersen, University of Aarhus: see P.J. Pedersen, “Analysing trends in subjective well-being in 15 European countries, 1973-2002”. With C. Bjørnskov and N.D. Gupta 2008. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, vol. 9: 317-330. Denmark has very few female professors of economics, but the originally Indian Nabanita Datta Gupta (b.1963) and co-author of the mentioned article above is one of them.
2. www.equalitytrust.org.uk (the slideshow with this quote is no longer available) (localized March 20, 2014).
3. Bjørn Nørgaard discusses the art action in an interesting interview in Danish available at <http://dk.gbtimes.com/livet/bjorn-norgaard-en-billedhugger-i-beijing> (localized March 22, 2014). The information used here comes mainly from this interview.
4. Unfortunately I have not been able to find out who the artist of this sculpture is.
5. Texts from one of the slides in the slide show *Trends and Tendencies of Women’s Law Studies in China in the Recent Decade* by Prof. Ma Yanan, Peking University, August 2012.

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