

Introduction

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In the last two decades the socialist regimes of both Vietnam and the People's Republic of China have undertaken major reorientations in their approaches to social and economic development and to governance. Termed "reform" [*gaige*] in China, and "renovation" [*doi moi*] in Vietnam, these reorientations have resulted in profound shifts in domestic social relations and state-society interactions, and in each nation's relations with the rest of the world. In both cases, state policies aimed at introducing market mechanisms into the economy and integrating them with the global world order have both contributed to and been spurred on by new understandings of the role of the state and the market; new conceptions of, and desires for, modernity; and new identities and subjectivities at both the individual and collective levels.

The similarities of the changes that have occurred in the socio-cultural as well as economic and political arenas in the two states are striking, but to date they have rarely been analysed in any depth; or rather, scholars of Vietnamese society have frequently turned to Chinese studies for reference and inspiration, but perhaps because of "big brother" and "big sister" chauvinism the reverse has been rare. In November 2003, a workshop at the Australian National University on "Gender, Socialism and Globalisation in Contemporary Vietnam and China" sought to address this lacuna, comparing the crucial role that gender plays in each state's political, socio-cultural and economic reconfigurations under what is nowadays commonly referred to as "postsocialism". Papers presented at the workshop tackled this topic from two different directions. Some examined the impact of "reform" and/or "renovation" on specific aspects of gender relations. Others focused on the ways in which new postsocialist policies, institutions and practices in a variety of arenas are fundamentally and thoroughly gendered. Many discussed the relationship between gender and postsocialism from both these angles.

Three of the four papers in this issue were first presented in this workshop, and the fourth, by Johanna Hood, was added later. All of the papers discuss the crucial question of the formation of subjects and subjectivities under postsocialism and the inevitable and central role that gender plays in that formation. Each draws on recent feminist and poststructuralist theorisations of gender, power and the construction of identities under modernity, and each contributes important insights into the relationship between individual agency and dominant discourses in the formation of gendered, postsocialist subjects and subjectivities.

They do so from very different perspectives. Jayne Werner's paper looks at the relationship between the *doi moi* Vietnamese state and the construction of different kinds of womanhood in contemporary Vietnamese culture. Specifically, it focuses on configurations

of the subjects of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in *Me chong toi* [*My Husband's Mother*], a popular film made recently by a Vietnamese state film company, and on the ways in which these were received by women in a rural commune in the Red River Delta area of northern Vietnam. Werner draws upon the work of Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler to argue that state-derived subject positions or subjecthoods are intrinsic to modern forms of governance. And in Vietnam, as elsewhere, womanhoods in particular have long served crucial functions in promoting the state's norms and goals. The film *Me chong toi* presents an idealised image of the mother-in-law as a virtuous, courageous and self-sacrificing woman, a figure who functions to strengthen a redefined family and its relationship to the state during the *doi moi* era. But how does a contemporary female audience respond to this figure? Werner found that older women, the mothers-in-law in her group of interlocutors, identified closely with the mother-in-law in the film and with the state-promoted values that she embodied. Younger daughters-in-law, on the other hand, were positive about the ideals that the mother-in-law in the film represented, but did not believe that her representation conformed to reality.

These findings, Werner suggests, indicate that the *doi moi* state has not relinquished its attempt to manage womanhoods in the family, and that women's subjectivities continue to be strongly influenced by these state-promoted womanhoods. The ways in which individuals are interpellated into these womanhoods are changing, however. At least in the context of their reception of *Me chong toi*, older women align themselves with state-promoted ideals without question, seemingly validating Althusser's theorisation of the interpellation of subjects by the state. However, younger women's reception of the film suggests that their interpellation is much less total. Although they do not try to subvert subjecthoods in the film in the way that Butler indicates in her discussion of interpellation, they seem able to put them to one side in a way that older women do not, and draw on other, non-state discourses to understand the film and its relationship to their own lives.

In a sense, the next paper, by Mandy Thomas and Nguyen Bich Thuan, takes up where Werner's paper leaves off, looking at the new plethora of non-state discourses through which the subject positions and subjectivities of young women in postsocialist Vietnam are shaped. Thomas and Nguyen argue that recent economic changes are bringing opportunities for young, wealthy, urban women to break with socialist tradition and carve their own styles of Vietnamese womanhood. These women reject state-controlled media and turn instead to websites that discuss love and sex, and dating chatlines where they search for partners from overseas. They join all-girl rock bands, go to discoteques and restaurants, wear the latest global fashions, and some aspire to be supermodels. Through their enthusiastic uptake of global, popular culture these women both draw upon and contribute to new understandings of gender and sexuality and new public spheres.

Thomas and Nguyen contend that in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh city and other big cities in Vietnam, participation in cyberculture and the consumption of other forms of popular culture has become a way of constituting young womanhoods against a regime the populace may wish to oppose. However, they also caution that these new womanhoods are available only to an élite urban minority. Poorer women do not have the same opportunities, for example, to use internet technology for dating or to buy the latest fashions. Furthermore, the state continues to intervene in popular culture, for example by closing internet cafes and destroying CDs and other material it considers to be pornographic. Consequently, young women's subjectivities are constructed in a borderland of conflicting moral sanctions and endorsements and through a simultaneous striving for global modernity and nationalist morality.

Pun Ngai's paper presents a rather different set of insights into the relationship between consumer culture and the formation of gendered subjectivities under postsocialism. It

examines the formation of a new identity in postsocialist China – that of the *dagongmei*, or migrant woman worker. Pun contrasts the formation of the *dagongmei* subject with that of *gongren*, or worker under Maoism. *Gongren* had a high status in Maoist rhetoric, while the contemporary *dagongmei* has a much lower status – that of a temporary, hired hand – in a new context shaped by hierarchical labour relations and the market. Whereas *gongren* was an asexual subjecthood promoted by the state, Pun sees the highly sexualised *dagongmei* as a project of global capital. And whereas Thomas and Nguyen highlight the liberatory potential of the consumer-oriented and sexualised popular culture that global capital has brought to Vietnam and China, Pun underscores the fact that the imbrication of the *dagongmei* subject with this culture contributes to their subordination to a global division of labour bent on extracting maximum profit from cheap, willing female labour.

At the same time, Pun draws on Foucault to argue that while the formation of the *dagongmei* involves subjectivisation and subjection, it is also a project of self-subjectivisation, and that between subjectivisation and self-subjectivisation there is both agreement and contestation. In an electronics factory in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone in southern China, supervisors frequently complain about the discipline of *dagongmei*. Submissiveness, so central to stereotypes of Asian female labour, does not come ready-made. Rather, it must be constantly articulated and re-articulated through everyday management practices. Gender is central to these practices, with workers continually reminded that “you should not act like a boy who is lazy and troublesome, careless and rough. Otherwise, you won’t be able to marry yourself out”. Powerful as these forms of regulation are, women workers do not always conform to them. Some maintain a “butch” image, others fight aggressively. Gossip and laughter about sex and sexual relations are also both forms of resistance against management and a medium through which women collude in performing themselves as sexualised subjects. And the shared pleasures of shopping, painting fingernails and “dressing up” are similarly both a means by which young women fight against their identity as “backward”, rural *dagongmei* with “coarse hands and feet”, and a sexualisation and subjection that serves the interests of capital.

The papers by Werner, Thomas and Nguyen, and Pun all emphasise disjunctures between socialism and postsocialism with regard to gender, subject formation and state-society relations. In a sense, so too does the final paper by Johanna Hood, but in other ways this paper underscores the notion that “the more things change the more they stay the same”. Hood’s paper examines the creation of female identity in *Summer of Betrayal*, a novel written by the popular but controversial contemporary Chinese woman writer Hong Ying. Hood suggests that literature such as this is fertile ground for understanding the formation of female identities and processes of self-identification in postsocialist China. *Summer of Betrayal* was first published in Taiwan in 1992, and because of its subject matter – the dramatic impact of the Tian’anmen massacre of 1989 on a woman poet – it is unavailable in PRC bookshops, although it is widely circulated unofficially. In the novel, the poet Lin Ying undergoes a long process of self-realisation, coming to understand the gendered nature of identity and the personal limitations of female sexuality within a patriarchal social order. Her personal journey of self-actualisation as a woman combines with the political crisis of post-Tian’anmen Beijing to produce the liberation of her female body from patriarchal, misogynist constraints and the “democratisation” of her newly individuated self from the authoritarianism of a brutal police state. This culminates in the concluding scene of the novel in which Lin Ying and her friends hold a party to farewell her lover, who is going overseas without her. Lin Ying celebrates her independence by dancing naked with her female friends. When the police arrive, her friends quickly dress and denounce her as mad, but she refuses to put on her clothes and is arrested for indecent behaviour. Hood suggests that in the context of the

failed democracy protests of Tian'anmen Lin Ying's journey points to the need for the realisation of individual selfhood, free from patriarchal and authoritarian constraints on sexualities and bodies, as a precondition for social democracy.

Hong Ying's novel indicates the emergence under postsocialism of new forms of female subjecthood and subjectivity very different from those of the past. Against this evidence of change in subject formation, however, one can note that both the figure of Lin Ying and the author Hong Ying herself are unique and isolated. They stand alone in a postsocialist context in which subject formation is dominated by state authoritarianism and patriarchal gender relations in different ways from the socialist past, but to much the same extent.