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Eva Kit Wah Man

INTRODUCTION

This anthology assembles my research and writings of the past two decades on traditional and current global issues related to Chinese female bodies and gendered bodies in general. The texts and subjects in the book act as cross-references among the chapters, in terms of their materials, sources, and theoretical frameworks. It illustrates several core philosophical issues that overlap, but which are important grounds for comparative research and dialogue among Chinese philosophies, feminist studies, and cross-cultural thoughts around the subject. The interdisciplinary approach also integrates philosophical enquiries with contextual studies throughout the book, which echoes the main agenda of feminist philosophy. As implied in the title, the issues of body are related to philosophical enquiries, aesthetic representation, and gender politics that are simultaneously historical and contextual.

This book discusses new conceptual models that feminist scholars are seriously investigating that might displace dualism and emancipate notions of the body from Cartesian mechanistic models and metaphors. In this light, the various chapter themes of the book review traditional and contemporary alternatives. In the fields of gender, body, and aesthetics, comparative studies that bring in both Western feminist philosophical perspectives and Chinese philosophical discourses deserve much attention. This book seeks to address the meaningful revelations that come about via comparative study and case studies.

Most Western philosophical paradigms are based directly or indirectly on the binary oppositions of rational-irrational, subject-object, nature-culture, form-matter, mind-body, active-passive, and presence-absence that ancient Greek philosophers like Aristotle hinted at, and, above all, on the implications of these binaries on issues of gender, body, and mind. They attribute these oppositions to the establishment of the masculine and rational culture in the West. Philosophical debates and criticisms on these paradigms have hardly looked beyond the West; therefore, in this book, I want to reflect on Chinese philosophy in the above discussions. Some of the questions I seek to address include: Does Confucianism rule out the capacity of women as moral subjects and hence as aesthetic subjects? Do forms of Chinese philosophy in some ways contribute or correspond to the patriarchal Confucian culture? In terms of patriarchal values, the situation in Chinese philosophy is similar to and at the same time different from that of the West. This book explicates these differences via case studies under historical and cultural contexts. It explores whether Chinese philosophy is able to provide sources or frames of reference for the development of alternative perspectives sought by Western feminist scholars.

I also aim to address, demonstrate, and offer perspectives that may provide alternative models in some of the key debates on gender, body, and aesthetics. The findings revealed in these case studies tell of paradigm shifts and fundamental differences, making the dialogue between Chinese philosophy and Western feminist philosophy immensely interesting and tricky. The overall objective of this book project is to engage Chinese philosophy as a critical intervention for reframing the existing scholarship on gender issues and aesthetics.

I found a lot of wisdom in a range of feminist philosophies of the body—also limitations. The discourses begin with Plato, who proposed dualisms of form-matter and of mind-body, and who asserted that the body interferes with, and is a danger to, the operations of reason. Plato believed that man is a spiritual or non-corporeal being trapped in the body, the *soma*. His discourse on the *hypodochē* is considered as one on materiality, that when nature receives form as a sensible object, *her* proper function is to receive, take, accept, welcome, include, and even comprehend. *She* has no proper shape and is not a body. The receptacle principle, which applies universally, is then associated with the female, which is constructed as a nonthematizable materiality, but which never resembles either the formative principle or what it creates. This element

of sensuous and passionate corporeality enables philosophers to maintain the essential “neutrality” of the mind while allowing individual and sexual differences.

I purposely divide my writing into three sections in this book. The first section, “Body Discourses in Chinese Philosophy,” contains philosophical discussion on body and mind. I bring in theoretical and philosophical discussion of Western traditions such as those of Plato, Descartes, and Kant to examine their views on body and mind and how the Chinese philosophical ideas offered by Confucians and Daoists provide alternative body ontologies for critical feminist practices.

The second section, “Body Aesthetics and Art,” reviews female aesthetic representations in classical traditional Chinese works ranging from *The Book of Songs*, women’s embroidery, sexuality and suggested ways of kissing, and contemporary body art as represented by the controversial body artist He Chengyao. These chapters demonstrate the intertwining relationships among body, sexuality, aesthetics, and ascribed gendered roles in social environments. Here, my writing widely discusses, with concrete examples, concepts of *yin*, *yang*, and *qi* in scholarly studies of the body, gendered roles, art, and aesthetics. I particularly add in this section the environmental aesthetics developed by Arnold Berleant and compare it to a Chinese garden. The discussion takes the bodily experience of the subject and the interaction between the subject and her environment as a core part of the aesthetic experience. The Deweyan model is revisited for comparative purposes.

The third section, “Body and Gender Matters,” aims to unfold the changing perceptions of femininity from imperial to contemporary China. The first two case studies touch on female body ideals in the literary fantasies of the late Ming, in the iron girls of Communist China, and in the Olympics hoopla of the Beijing Olympics in 2008. These case studies are compiled in two parts, making a developmental perspective possible. This section also includes a psychoanalytic perspective, bearing the agenda that mind and body are interactively related. The case study is about the first application, by Pan Guangdan in the 1920s, of Freudian psychoanalysis to the female literatus Feng Xiaoqing 馮小青 (1595–1612). The discussion then extends to the relations among mental illness, bodily weakness, and physical sickness. The section also discusses Hong Kong women’s fashion in the 1960s after the political riots of 1967 and under strong British colonial rule. It tells once again true stories of the ways that women’s bodies were

shaped by colonial politics. Finally, the subject of sex and emotion in the development of the ethical discourse on Chinese female sex workers from the late Qing to the present day is discussed, which looks at body and gender matters in a topic that has seldom been examined. This section discusses the global economy, which has great impacts on notions of female beauty today. Regardless of the multicultural and historical factors in its formation and construction processes, the global economy brings homogenizing tendencies in women's fashion and standards of appearance. But contestation over contemporary female beauty within the turbulent modern history of China deserves consideration in all its particularities, including in the policies and regulations posed by the state, treating the female body as an apparatus.

I use certain methodologies throughout this anthology to draw coherent themes from among all the case studies. In Chapter 1, "Contemporary Feminist Body Theories and Mencius' Ideas of Body and Mind," I touch on basic Confucian body discourses that are well articulated in Mencius' ideas of the body and mind and refer to the fact that numerous feminist philosophers and biologists have been trying to destabilize the notion of "biological sex." The return to biological essentialism is strongly contested, since "physical experiences" do not make gender, but rather the specific social regulatory ideals by which female bodies are trained and formed do.

In this chapter, I first examine the Western philosophical concepts of corporeality, starting with Plato and Descartes. I then discuss how the works of Spinoza and Merleau-Ponty may offer understandings of body and mind that challenge the Cartesian body-mind dualism. Yet, as informed by Elizabeth Grosz's critique, new concepts of corporeality that go beyond the regime of dualism still need to be developed. In view of this, I propose looking at Confucian philosophy, especially Mencius' ideas of body and mind, to see if it can offer a form of ontology and metaphysics that complements the effort of Western feminist philosophers. This is followed by a comparative analysis of both philosophical traditions. I conclude by arguing that Mencius' ideas of mind and body can initiate a radical rethinking of the connection among reason, body, and ethical-political issues that enables feminists to develop alternative models of corporeality.

In investigating if Mencius' ideas constitute a body ontology useful for critical feminist practices, the answer is mixed, as it is difficult to

tell whether Mencius' body is gendered. But if we examine his work in its historical and cultural contexts, taking the Confucian patriarchal society into account, the sage or "great man" or "superior man" would appear to refer to men only. Since women in the Confucian tradition are viewed as feeble in terms of their moral capabilities, it is said that they need to be educated and controlled, otherwise they might upset the patriarchal social order. Female bodies are dangerous and threatening since they can be seductive, leading men to excessive sexual desire or socially deviant behavior; however, women's behavior can be beneficial to men under Confucian regulation, or if they act according to the instructions of the Daoist theories of sexuality. In translations of and commentaries on Mencius, his usage of "man" and "he" to indicate the human is a hint that Mencius' body is gendered as a male body. Second, ideologically speaking, the identification of women with materiality that feminists have pointed out to be feminine-oriented may also be detected in Mencius' work. The small components that Mencius refers to could be interpreted as the material and ontological bases—that is, the "female" side—of human existence. They are aligned with the "receiving" principle, waiting passively for the form-giving process and for moral imperatives—both activities supervised by the mind. The Western binary of passion-reason seems to correspond to that of vital force-moral will in Mencius, also in that the former should follow the latter in order to attain a harmonious humanity.

Despite the associations we make within the social, historical, and ideological contexts of Mencius, the binary structure is the main question that remains. Are Mencius' ideas of the body the same as the mind-body binary of which Western feminists are critical? The Confucian cosmological model cannot be said to be the same, yet the texts seem to have separated vital force and will, *ming* 命 and *xing* 性, emphasizing in every respect the superiority of the latter over the former. The chapter finally turns to *I-Ching*, the basic text on Confucian cosmology, and to the notions of *yin* and *yang*. The revelation is that the *yin* (the female principle-force-aspect, representing the receptive and the potential) and the *yang* (the male principle-force-aspect, representing the creative and the actual), as well as the difference and differentiation of things that are aligned with the interaction of the two, do not exhibit any real opposition or antagonism in Chinese philosophy. They are only opposite insofar as they are complementary. There is neither tension nor hostility between these terms.

I quote Cheng Chung-ying saying that, according to the Chinese cosmological paradigm illustrated in *I-Ching*, the world is a process of change and development, moving toward unity and a state of holistic harmonization. The appearance of discrepancy, imperfection, conflict, contradiction, or struggle is seen as a manifestation of the incomplete sub-processes of the interaction of polarities. Conflicts can be avoided if one strives to conform to human nature (*xing*) by cultivating one's understanding and by adjusting one's action properly. This adjustment is a process of harmonization. To conclude, according to the metaphysics of harmony and conflict in the *I-Ching*, antagonism calls for a moral and practical transformation of humans. One wonders whether we can hope and relax when we consider the Chinese patriarchal suppression of women, accepting this condition as an artificial, contextual, and political practice that Confucian spirituality and moral philosophy can help to transcend? Western feminists might find the *yin-yang* polarity useful, including the mutual generative and destructive modes described in the *I-Ching*, with their contrary and complementary qualities. At least, the principles of holistic unity and organic balance are meaningful ideas distinct from the mechanical-atomistic model of which feminists are critical. It is in these senses that Mencius' ideas of mind and body may initiate a radical rethinking of the connections among reason, the body, and ethical-political issues.

The discussion in this book also touches on aesthetics from time to time, which helps a great deal in laying the ground of the comparative study of body matters. In Chapter 2, "Chinese Philosophy and the Suggestion of a Matriarchal Aesthetics," which deals with the critique of binary oppositions in Western philosophy, I introduce a model of matriarchal aesthetics, as suggested by Heide Göttner-Abendroth, and discuss it in the light of Chinese philosophy. Göttner-Abendroth sets out principles of a matriarchal aesthetics that might provide us with a recent paradigm of feminist aesthetics. The chapter summarizes the principles of matriarchal art, which is in the form of magic and diversity in unity. It is like mythology, which exists as a fundamental category of human understanding. It argues that the universal, objective nature of the structure of matriarchal art mentioned prevents the identification from becoming subjective sentimentality, for it cannot be objectified but is a complex, whole process. The interesting thing is that matriarchal art involves the physical and mental possibilities of communicating with Nature by means of symbolic acts. We should learn to adapt ourselves

to Nature, which includes our bodies and our immediate environment. The joy and delight thereby released may be traced back to the harmonious correlation of a change in Nature with a spiritual change in ourselves, a new form of living.

It is under these aspects that matriarchal aesthetics is raised as a useful comparison with Chinese aesthetics. Despite the notion that systematic aesthetics is absent from traditional Confucian and Daoist philosophies, contemporary neo-Confucian scholars such as Mou Zongsan and Tang Junyi have reconstructed theories of human primal experience according to traditional Confucianism and Daoism, which allude to aesthetic experience. In one of his last writings, the translation and critique of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, Mou presents and recommends the theory of Daoist intellectual intuition, which is aesthetics in nature. First, he points out that the subjective principle of Daoism is *wu wei* (no action), which refers to the effort of the human mind to transcend all kinds of human epistemological functions and move towards the realm of the metaphysical Dao. Daoist philosophy promotes the annulments of human activity and knowledge to recover the presentation of Nature in itself, which has been hidden and distorted by human understanding, perception, and conception. According to Daoism, to know is to not-know, to be wise is to be ignorant; only so-called fools are able to grasp the truth of Nature. Tang Junyi introduces his "host and guest" relation to describe the relationship between things and the mind in the human primal experience, in contrast with the subject-and-object relation in Western theories of knowledge, in which subjects dominate and objects subordinate. According to Tang, the objectification of the mind takes place only after the primal experience, which he describes as "the totality of intuition." His understanding of the experience is actually quite similar to that of Mou.

My suggestion is that, while we can find many similarities between the principles of a matriarchal aesthetics and those of Chinese philosophy, there are points of comparison that we should consider. One of these is that aesthetic experience in both takes place as a fundamental, principal process that provides a "pre-existing inner structure" prior to the objectification process. It demands that our body and mind should adapt to Nature, which includes our immediate environment, leading to the harmonious correlation of change in Nature with spiritual change in ourselves.

The comparison of feminist aesthetics with Chinese aesthetics shows that this area of cross-cultural philosophical dialogue might

present scholars working in aesthetics, Western or Chinese, with promising directions for further research. One area that clearly needs more exploration is the comparison (metaphysical and experiential) of the myth/ritual complexes of archaic peoples, to which the feminist paradigm refers, with what we find in Daoist texts. More importantly, this investigation does not deny that there are patriarchal forms and institutions in the Chinese tradition but begins to look at that tradition for resources that might deconstruct the patriarchy.

There is a recent call to reclaim the body and reposition its locus and nature of identity in Western circles of academic and artistic expression. Body theories and body art have become topics of attention in addition to relevant philosophical discussions. Chapter 3 looks at the issue from a comparative perspective, focusing on representative cases in Chinese and Western portrait painting. It first discusses Francis Bacon's work on human bodies, identifying the latter's philosophical and psychological locus. It then outlines the Confucian discourses of the body and related metaphysical grounds, and their revelations for traditional Chinese portrait painting. A Chinese portrait such as that of Gu Kaizhi is introduced and compared with that illustrated by Bacon. In the comparison, the following questions are addressed: How are body discourses related to different bodily expressions? In what ways do Confucian ideas of the body shed light on the recent discussion on reclaiming the body in the West? Are the dichotomies of mind and body resolved in the Confucian tradition? Can active engagement via the process of reworking artwork create new possibilities of bodily expression?

Most human expressions in Gu's work are restrained and delicate; there are few extremes of either emotion or gesture, and the figures seem to combine humanness with a certain ethereal quality. The depiction of human subjects is characterized by its naiveté and its humanistic spirit. This chapter, based on the main theoretical ground of the book, recaps Mencius' theory that the mind is the noblest and greatest component of the body. It is more than simply physical because of its moral consciousness or innate knowledge of goodness. This explains why Gu's portraiture emphasizes the subject's head and face, particularly the eye or pupil, which he believes can speak for the subject's soul or spirit. In comparison, Bacon's subjects are associated with "exhilarated despair," sexuality, and violence, seeming to violate the moral norms of his times. His figures show the "shattering of the subject" or the replacement

of a unified self by a fragmented self, which has been read as “loss of self” with psychoanalytic implications. Gu’s subjects assert a moral self in his delicate and linear style. The works of Bacon and Gu belong to different cultures in different times, yet can we go further and ask how the recovery of the body in contemporary Western discourse can learn from Confucian theories of the body?

Confucians discuss the body as something ontological and natural, as do some theories in the Western tradition. However, contemporary discourses stress that the difference does not have to do with biological “facts,” so much as with the manner in which culture marks bodies and creates the specific conditions in which they live and recreate themselves. The marking is within the operation of various forms of power relations through languages or signifying practices. Chapter 3 revisits Moira Gatens’s observation, that what is crucial in our current context is the thorough interrogation of the means by which bodies become invested with difference. The revelation of this study, through traditional and cultural review, is on the model of construction whereby the social acts on the natural, as well as the claim that there is no reference to a pure body that is not at the same time a further formation of the body.

In Section Two, the book focuses on traditional and contemporary Chinese exemplary studies, which includes female body representations in *The Book of Songs*, traditional Chinese embroidery, discourses of kissing, contemporary female body art, and Chinese gardens. Chapter 4 examines the pre-Qin Confucian text of *The Book of Songs* as an important source for the early discussion of feminine ideals in Chinese women’s history. It first reviews the discussion on feminine ideals by referring to representative cases or stories described in the source. It then classifies the kinds and modalities of female bodily ideals involved in the songs’ gendered narratives, social and political representations, and common human qualities. The chapter seeks to investigate the relations of these recommended ideals with situation ethics; gendered notions of “inner” and “outer beauty”; “love and marriage”; and eros and sexuality. It summarizes the multiple modalities of female bodily ideals suggested in this early literary source.

Among the lines of the songs, we can see that female beauty (*meiren*) in classical Chinese referred to the femaleness, skin color, and erotic qualities of a woman, which include bodily beauty, limb shape, make up, color of dress, and so on, appealing to all the senses. Yet it is the vitality