

Eva Kit-Wah Man

Bodies in China: Philosophy, Aesthetics, Gender, and Politics

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Eva Kit Wah Man has compiled a volume that advances current endeavors toward a truly global vision of philosophy as a discipline. Her stated intent is to offer "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" by engaging "Chinese philosophy as a critical intervention for reframing the existing scholarship on gender issues and aesthetics" (ix-x). Simultaneously, she poses crucial questions about Chinese philosophy, and more specifically Confucian philosophy, in relation to patriarchal value systems. For example, can women be recognized as moral objects and aesthetic subjects?

The thirteen essays in the book address a wide range of topics related to "bodies in China" under three general headings: I. Body Discourses in Chinese Philosophy (chapters 1-3), II. Body Aesthetics and Art (chapters 4-8), and III. Body and Gender Matters (chapters 9-13). The author skillfully interweaves traditional perspectives with contemporary trends representative of Chinese and Amero-Eurocentric scholarship. Women's diverse life experiences are well represented, from sheltered ladies of the ancient nobility to today's sex workers, highly educated concubines, Iron Girls of the Revolution, a narcissistic writer, and an artist traumatized by the Cultural Revolution. The extensive bibliography demonstrates a marshalling of key sources from such fields as feminism, sociology, and philosophy. Images in the appendix expand the reader's understanding of the aesthetic elements under discussion. As a whole, the book is a significant and original contribution to feminist philosophy that can serve as a resource for scholars and students alike.

The opening chapter of part I, "Contemporary Feminist Body Theories," explores alternatives to a rampant "binary structure" across cultures that restricts the female to a denigrated physical realm. Man considers the philosophies of Spinoza and Merleau-Ponty as possible new conceptual models for "an open-ended ontology" sought by feminist scholars (5). And, she analyzes the Chinese theories of vital force (*qi*) and will in the Confucian philosopher Mencius in conjunction with yin/yang complementarity discussed by the contemporary scholar Chung-

ying Cheng as alternative views of the mind/body relationship. Chapter 2 introduces "Matriarchal Aesthetics" via a feminist critique of Kantian aesthetics as sexist, based on Kant's distinction between the subordinate role of taste associated with women and the primacy of male rationality in the sublime. Man summarizes Heide Göttner-Abendroth's nine principles of an alternative matriarchal aesthetics, embedded in a continuity between humans and Nature that defies dualism. She compares these to the aesthetic experience emphasized by traditional Chinese philosophies, as set forth by contemporary neo-Confucians Mou Zongsan and Tang Junyi, as a possible manifestation of matriarchal art. The final chapter in this section (chapter 3), "Reclaiming the Body," delineates contrasts between the paintings of Francis Bacon, influenced by Nietzsche and Freud, and the Confucian-infused portraiture of Gu Kaizhi (c. 344-406). The stark contrast between visualizations of the human body found in these two artists inform us about underlying cultural assumptions and experiences: "Bacon's subjects are associated with 'exhilarated despair,' sexuality, and violence that seem to violate the moral norms of his times, Gu's subjects celebrate Confucian virtues, and his works are regarded as tools of moral education" (39). The stark contrast between these artistic approaches, Man argues, suggests that Confucian philosophy can help heal the alienation between mind and body that has come to characterize contemporary experience.

Section II concentrates on a provocative selection of Chinese artforms, drawing on both ancient and contemporary sources. Man mines poems from the *Book of Songs (Shi Jing)*, one of China's oldest texts, in chapter 4, to reveal both female and male bodily ideals grounded in physical vitality and sensuality. In this early period, mind/body coherence was valued, assuming an inherent link between inner and outer beauty for both women and men. Man describes these songs as "the map of a lost female horizon" (59), reflecting an early period when female beauty was not confined to physical superficialities. Unlike many patriarchal systems, early Chinese culture esteemed more elusive qualities in women, such as vitality, spontaneity, and elegance. Chapter 5, "Reflections on Traditional Chinese Women's Embroidery," argues for the philosophical relevance of embroidery in terms of "bodily expression, gender identity, and fashion" (61). This highly valued practical skill for women of all social classes also served as a vehicle for "emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, or spiritual experience" (67). Man notes that embroidery recently has experienced a resurgence in China both for individual women and fashion entrepreneur Vivienne Tam. A philosophical analysis of the art of kissing in China is the rather unexpected topic encountered in chapter 6. Regarded as an exclusively sexual behavior within traditional Chinese culture, kissing is discussed in great detail by Daoist texts. Along with other means for exchanging bodily fluids during intercourse, kissing is believed to promote health and longevity through a balancing of yin and yang energies. Due to this positive valuation, Confucians generally were able to avoid a puritanical denunciation of sexuality rampant in many conservative traditions around the world.

Man elucidates the challenging work of contemporary performance artist He Chengyao in chapter 7 under the heading of "Extreme Expression and History Trauma," whereby the female body is "reclaimed" (86). Such body art serves as a "social commentary" that draws on violence, masochism, mutilation, exhibitionism, and even scandalous immorality (89). In He's case, she is responding to her unfortunate experiences as the child of a mentally ill mother during the Cultural Revolution. In an abrupt yet comforting shift, chapter 8 introduces the philosophy of the Chinese garden in the Daoist context of Arnold Berleant's environmental aesthetics and

"aesthetic engagement" (101). Resonances with Tang Junyi's Confucian-oriented "wandering in art" (108) as one dimension of landscape appreciation are also assessed. The garden, functioning as a landscape painting one may enter into, also constitutes a place of refuge from what the ancient Chinese referred to as "the dusty world" of mundane cares and sorrows by reconnecting us with an aesthetically enhanced version of Nature.

Section III delves into dimensions of the female body/gender in China past and present. Chapter 9, "Female Bodily Aesthetics, Politics, and Feminine Ideals of Beauty," surveys Daoist and Confucian perspectives on female beauty. An examination of "Courtesan Culture" in the late Ming to Qing dynasties reveals evolving (or often devolving) social roles and expectations imposed upon women. The chapter ends with a brief look at changing definitions of female beauty from the Communist Revolution through the Cultural Revolution and into the recent past, with its Amero-Eurocentric influences. Specific role models are highlighted in chapter 10: "Beauty and the State: Literati Fantasy, Iron Girls, and the Olympics Hoopla." Changing political agendas have mandated a shift in womanly ideals--from the "healthy beauty" (*jianmei*) of post-1931 modernization to the unisex "Iron Girls" empowered to hold up half of Heaven (143-43). In the late 1970s, which Man refers to as the "awakening period," economic change and growth gives rise to a "cosmopolitanism with Chinese characteristics" (145-146) paralleling Deng Xiaoping's "socialism with Chinese characteristics." The 2008 Olympics hosted by China provided an opportunity to showcase this new female identity, "a soft-looking, ideal reception model" (150) invoking a proud nationalism, which for Man displays "signs of imperialism in excess" (151).

Along these same lines, chapter 11, "Psychoanalysis and Women's Physiology and Psychopathology in Feudal China," reviews the case of Qing dynasty writer Feng Xiaoqing. Her brief tragic life was analyzed in 1922 by Pan Guangdan, who traced Feng's problems to narcissism and sexual dysfunction ("auto-love" and "shadow love") consistent with Freud's theories. For reformist Pan, this case exposed "the repressive and gender-biased environment of feudal China" (168). However, Man notes that classical Chinese texts had already recognized a connection between emotional imbalance and physiological dysfunction.

Among the most striking chapters is a reevaluation of feminine fashion as a legitimate and insightful approach to deeper cultural trends (chapter 12), "Fashioning Body: Hong Kong Chinese Women, Fashion, and Identity Issues of the Sixties." While acknowledging the frivolous aspect of fashion, Man also observes "fashion is the battlefield for identity" (183). She is uniquely able to incorporate her personal experiences coming of age in Hong Kong during the 1960s, when Cantonese film images of women as chaste, loyal victims began to be challenged by an influx of Hollywood films featuring fashion icons such as Audrey Hepburn. The rise of women's fashion is outlined as it progressed from a lucrative industry employing women, to an impetus to Westernization that became an invitation to self-definition of the "New Woman" who rebelled against traditional expectations by striving for individuality, self-esteem, and personal empowerment.

One aspect of that new identity is exposed in the concluding chapter (chapter 13): "Sex and Emotion: The Representation of Chinese Female Sex Workers in Recent Discourses and the Cosmopolitan Context." Ang Lee's controversial film *Lust, Caution* reflects the tone of tension and confusion regarding the relationship, if any, between sex and love, physicality and emotion.

The plot of the film melds a spy thriller (Chinese patriots intent on thwarting Japanese occupation) with a raw depiction of female sexual desire (an assassin who falls in love with her target). A simplistic and hierarchical dualism of abstract mind (the controlling masculine) and material body (the receptive feminine) underlying political and economic structures reemerges here. Such gender distinctions are challenged by scholars such as Judith Butler for whom "becoming a gender is a mindful process in a cultural reality laden with sanctions, taboos, and prescriptions" (189). Man demonstrates that today's sex workers live under and with certain rules, which differ from traditional rules for prostitutes in the late Ming "cult of *qing*" (emotion) that governed the personal relationships they were expected to develop with their clients. In contrast to traditional idealizations of emotionally engaged prostitutes, film depictions of today's sex industry tend toward instrumentalism, devoid of personal relationships for the women. However, Man identifies evidence of a domestication of "the cosmopolitanism of sex commerce" among Chinese populations. Variations are noted between mainland sex workers motivated by money or nationalism and those in Hong Kong who are "more 'humane'" or steeped in traditional Chinese values (198).

Unfortunately, this otherwise intriguing collection of essays often reads like a draft in need of careful editing. It is marred by factual errors, unsupported generalizations, and problematic translations of Chinese terms. In several apparent references to the Qin Dynasty, Qing is mentioned instead--for example "traditional Confucian texts from pre-Qing to the Song" (24). This can be very confusing, especially for readers unfamiliar with Chinese history. Thoughtful scholarship also requires statements to be nuanced, avoiding counterfactual generalizations. Although the structure of Chinese society made most women "entirely dependent on males and their close relatives" (122), there were important exceptions--such as Daoist priestesses, Buddhist nuns, and the celebrated poet Xue Tao (768-831).

In discussing Chinese sex manuals, a claim is made that "the woman is always described as the 'enemy' or the 'opponent'" (79). Although later texts do portray intercourse as a "battle of the sexes," pejorative references to women are absent in the oldest extant texts, dating from the early Han: "Uniting Yin and Yang" (*Ho yin yang*) and "Discourse on the Highest Tao Under Heaven" (*Tian xia zhi-dao tan*). Their clinical approach provides detailed descriptions of symptoms and stages of sexual response in both women and men. Instead of casting women as sources of energy to be exploited, they are treated as equal partners in the mutual benefits of intercourse. The final advice offered by the "Highest Dao" text is as follows: "If one proceeds slowly and patiently, the woman will be exceedingly joyful. She will adore you like a brother and love you like a parent. One who has mastered this *tao* [*dao*] deserves to be called a heavenly gentleman" (Wile 1992, 83).

Finally, rendering *Lie Nü* as "women of admonition" (120) is not only a departure from standard translations such as "exemplary women," but also misconstrues the intended meaning. Similarly, while *Tian* can be translated as "sky" in a contemporary context, it fails to convey the transcendent force originally implied.

Reference

Wile, Douglas. 1992. *Art of the bedchamber: The Chinese sexual yoga classics, including women's solo meditation texts*. Albany: State University of New York Press.