

*Bodies in China: Philosophy, Aesthetics, Gender, and Politics.* By Eva Kit Wah Man. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2016. Pp. xxv + 257. \$52.00.

Reading this fascinating book is like travelling to an unknown country with a knowledgeable and intrepid companion: one does not fear getting lost, and the journey is made all the more enjoyable by unexpected discoveries. To scholars in and out of the China field, the body is at once a familiar and vexing topic. In approaching her topic from three frames—philosophy, art or aesthetics, and gender (each corresponding to one of the three sections of the book)—Professor Eva Man has articulated the cultural and historical specificities of “bodies in China.”

Professor Man’s use of the plural in referring to her subject of concern is in itself an important argument of her book. The body is notoriously difficult to study because it is not a transhistorical subject: the body of a courtesan in the Tang is, by dint of her diet and habits, different from that of a postmodern teenager in Hong Kong. Nor is the irreducible physicality of the body, tied to a person’s sensory experiences, amenable to an abstract or “objective” analysis, which is the usual preferred mode of scholarship. Compounding the problem is the body’s troubled relationship with women. In many societies, discrimination against women takes the form of “biological determinism,” or reduction of the human qualities of women to their procreative functions. In spite of this over-identification of woman with body, or perhaps because of it, the body is often a productive venue for women to express themselves and to resist patriarchal domination. Perhaps for this reason, the “bodies” in the title of the book refer primarily to female bodies.

Eva Man brings multiple skills to her task: the clarity of mind of a philosopher, the keen eyes of a news reporter, and the skilful hands of an embroiderer. The result is not a conventional academic treatise although all the scholarly apparatus ranging from endnotes, bibliography, to index is complete. In the place of a coherent thesis and sustained arguments, the reader gets flashes of insight; instead of exhaustive research and systematic development the reader is invited to savour the author’s speculation and imagination. To borrow the author’s description of the fashion culture of Hong Kong in the 1960s, the book has a “compound look” (p. 179). It is a bridge that brings the worlds of East and West, male and female, as well as scholarly and popular writing into conversation.

Section I of the book, “Body Discourses in Chinese Philosophy,” is the most coherent and vigorous of the three. In three relatively short chapters, the author sets into motion two dialogues, the first being a cross-cultural one between continental philosophers in the European tradition (notably Kant and Descartes) and neo-Confucian philosophers in the Chinese (one is tempted to say The Chinese University of Hong Kong) tradition, notably Tang Junyi 唐君毅 and Mou Zongsan 牟宗三.

In the place of such strict binaries as subject-over-object that structure the cognitive theories of the continental philosophers, Man proposes Tang's more flexible construct of "host and guest" to describe the transaction between "things and the mind in the human primal experience" (pp. xv, 25; cf. p. 103). She thus paves the way for the introduction of a more integrated view of the body-mind (or what some European historians of science have called the mindful hand or the mindful body).<sup>1</sup> This serves as the foundation of Man's subsequent discussions of female bodies as always already mindful and aestheticized.

As germinal as this cross-cultural philosophical reading may be, it is not as original as the second set of dialogues conducted in the first section of the book, a cross-gender one between the above-named male philosophers and such Euro-American feminist philosophers as Elizabeth Grosz and Moira Gatens. Writing in the 1990s, Grosz and Gatens both seek to destroy the mind-body and subject-object binaries, thereby establishing the body as the foundation of human knowledge and experience. Together with Judith Butler, whose classic *Bodies that Matter* also appeared in the 1990s, the three become Man's main interlocutors. Although she later expresses reservations about the lack of cultural specificities of Western feminist discourses (pp. 99–100), Man recognizes the latter's radical potential in foregrounding corporeality as the basis of philosophy. In this vein, Man's critique of the masculinist nature of Mencius's theory of the body (p. 13ff) is a gem that deserves more systematic development.<sup>2</sup>

As one reads on, the author's philosophical, emotional, and political commitments slowly reveal themselves. For all of her critique of the male-dominated nature of Confucian society, by training and perhaps by choice the author retains her faith in the transformative power of Confucianism as a set of spiritual values and moral philosophy, the abiding faith of Tang Junyi and Mou Zongsan. Her ultimate objective in writing this book, a collection of essays written and revised over twenty years, is so that "we can hope that when we consider the Chinese patriarchal suppression of women, we may consider this condition as an artificial, contextual, and political practice that Confucian spirituality and moral philosophy can help to transcend" (p. 15).

<sup>1</sup> Lissa Roberts, Simon Schaffer, and Peter Dear, eds., *The Mindful Hand: Inquiry and Invention from the Late Renaissance to Early Industrialization* (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed exposition of the Mencian theory of the body that resonates with Eva Man's, see Yang Rubin 楊儒賓, *Rujia shenti guan 儒家身體觀* (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiusuo chouben, 1996). Yang proposes that the Mencian body (*shenti* 身體) is made up of three elements: form (*xing* 形), material force (*qi* 氣), and heart-mind (*shen* 神 / *xin* 心).

Armed with this faith in the redemptive potential of Confucianism, the author embarks on a journey through China's long history, from ancient to contemporary eras, to identify and retrieve traces of a "lost female horizon" (p. xviii) from male-dominated discourses. Inspired by German feminist philosopher Heide Göttner-Abendroth's advocacy of a "matriarchal aesthetics" (pp. 20–22), Man finds the "intellectual intuition" that Mou Zongsan excavates from Daoism promising in its matriarchal implications (pp. 23–26). In the last chapter of Section I and the five chapters in Section II (entitled "Body Aesthetics and Art"), she proceeds to outline the key elements of this "lost female horizon" (pp. 58–59) by identifying sites of female self-identifications, standards of female beauty, and female experiences of their sentient bodies, including eyesight, touch, and sound. They form the most original part of the book.

To locate these traces, Man searches in both familiar and unexpected sites: the *Book of Songs*, such canonical paintings as *Admonitions of the Instructress* 女史箴圖 attributed to Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之, the practice of embroidery, the history of kissing, Daoist sexologist texts, the body work of female performance artist He Chengyao 何成瑤, and the classical garden Geyuan 個園 in Yangzhou. What unites these disparate locations is that to Man, they each embodies some aspects of the female bodily and aesthetic experiences that the male-dominated norms or discourses have failed to smother. Although Man does not offer an overarching description or discussion of this female corporeal aesthetics, the reader can deduce that it is non-binary in nature: it encompasses the mind and the body, the woman and her environment, the psychic and the material. Furthermore, this aesthetics is realized in movement, as a body-in-motion. In this aesthetics of "wandering" (after Tang Junyi, p. 108ff), the work of coming-and-going, or being-and-becoming, is never complete.

In contrast to the suspicion of extreme emotions in male-centred Confucian discourses, emotions occupy a prominent place in female bodily aesthetics. Man's thoughtful discussion of the life and practice of body artist He Chengyao (Chapter 7) brings the destructive and recuperative potential of extreme emotions to the fore. He, an oil painter by training, is the illegitimate daughter of a mother who, abandoned by He's father and censured by her neighbours, descended into madness. Inspired by German artist Joseph Beuys's notion of art as therapy, He turned to performance art to come to terms with her mother's madness. He's deliberate performance of jabbing needles into her own naked body, a homage to her mother who was seen running around naked in the streets, was painful to watch (or read). The psychological trauma that circulated between mother and daughter is externalized, rendering He's female body a poignant site of social critique.

Not all extreme emotions are negative. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Man's skilful reading of the *Book of Songs* (Chapter 4) evokes a pleasurable world in which the sexes mingle as freely as the sensorium of sounds and sights; metaphors of gender-specific and gender-unspecific beauty constitute poetry. This world

of synaesthesia, in which the mind had yet to split from the body, is to Man a paradise lost. Indeed, as her later chapter on the consumerist body in contemporary PRC makes clear, Man holds the world of the *Songs* as the most affirmative world of female “subjectivity and authenticity” from which later regimes have strayed. “At the very least, genuine vividness and individualistic identities have all been lost or rendered pretentious in the discourse on female beauty [promoted by consumerism]. They have been sacrificed in the quest for a combination of national (economic) pride and cosmopolitanism” (p. 150).

This statement, one that uses a classical ideal to critique the present, anticipates the five chapters gathered in Section III, “Body and Gender Matters.” Although diverse in subject matter and method, these chapters have a sharper critical edge as the author takes on the fourth and last topic in the subtitle of her book—politics—frontally. Perhaps it is no accident that the pejorative term “feudal” appears only in this section in reference to the premodern period of China’s past (title of Chapter 11, p. 168; cf. pp. 173, 184). In her discussions of the late imperial courtesan, the modern prostitute/sex-worker, the applicability of Freud in understanding female repression, and the Iron Girls, among others, the author seems more overt in her feminist critiques of the state and the consumerist regimes. In her chapter on the fashion culture of 1960s Hong Kong, a formative period for the author, however, she calls for recognition of fashion as “a locus of struggle for identity” (p. 176) instead of launching a critique of the capitalist regime that sustained it.

The reader is curious about the reasons why the author does not think that Lisa Rofel’s critique of cosmopolitanism in post-reform PRC (p. 146) is equally applicable to Hong Kong women of fashion in the 1960s, or why she thinks that Homi Bhabha’s observations about the *post*-colonial condition (pp. 183–84) are applicable to colonial Hong Kong. Similar questions abound. Why are the women who appear in the late-Ming brothel manual *Hunru pian* 渾如篇 called courtesans in one chapter (p. 125) but prostitutes and/or sex workers (p. 190ff) in another? It is in this section that the lack of sustained development across chapters, one of the inherent inadequacies of an anthology, is most strongly felt.<sup>3</sup> This does not detract from the value of Man’s translation of the little-known brothel manual, not to mention her insights on a range of subjects, from Ang Lee’s 李安 film *Lust, Caution* 色·戒 to the tumultuous coming of age of “Hong Kong people” in 1967.

<sup>3</sup> Allow me to mention here that there are repetitions in the book that should have been edited out (e.g., the discussion of the “Four Beginnings” on pp. 9–10 also appears on pp. 36–37). Furthermore, the same passages from the *Menciuis* are translated in slightly different ways when they re-appear elsewhere in the book (e.g., p. 8/p. 36; p. 10/p. 38; p. 11/p. 38; p. 12/p. 39). This can be confusing to readers. There are minor typos: p. 120, fifth line from top, 烈女 should read 列女; p. 154, second line from top, late Qing should read late Ming.

Throughout the book, there is a creative tension between the two poles of possibilities inherent in any study of the body as a subject of history and philosophy: the body as discourse and the body as experience.<sup>4</sup> The body that takes shape in discourse is abstract; the body as experienced is concrete in its physicality and sensuality. On the whole, I think that Man is more successful in delineating the discursive formation of bodies in Confucian/Daoist and modern China but less successful in articulating the body as experience despite her gallant attempts. This is due to no fault on her part; the latter is simply a more vexing undertaking that requires concerted efforts by multiple scholars from different disciplines. Using the clues that she has amassed and the approaches she has initiated, I would like to suggest several lines of inquiry in the interest of encouraging future scholars to explore these important issues of bodies, aesthetics, gender, and politics in China.

We may begin by rethinking the depiction of bodies (male or female) in the tradition of Chinese paintings and its relationship with embodied experiences at the time, in other words the politics of representation. It is the key issue that Man takes up with her study of the *Admonitions of the Instructress* attributed to Gu Kaizhi (Chapter 3). Man rightly recognizes the seminal importance of this painting, the first narrative handscroll attributed to a major artist in Chinese history. The masterpiece, now at the British Museum, consists of nine scenes showing the exemplary behaviour and lives of palace ladies, ending with the instructress writing out her admonitions in the last scene.<sup>5</sup> Taking the depiction of the human figures in this painting as representative of a “Confucian body aesthetics” (p. 27), Man finds in them the embodiment of the Mencian theory of the integrated mind-body as the location of the moral self that is coextensive with one’s environments (pp. xvi, 36–39; cf. p. 102).

Man goes on to explore the gender implications of the visual manifestations of “Confucian body aesthetics” in this and other chapters, this time with less salutary assessments. Considering the *Admonitions* scroll together with another painting

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Duden has articulated this tension most productively in her book *The Woman beneath the Skin: A Doctor’s Patients in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). Also useful is her insistence that a distinction be made between the modern and premodern body.

<sup>5</sup> The three initial scenes are now lost. For a recent study of this scroll, see Shane McCausland, *First Masterpiece of Chinese Painting: The Admonitions Scroll* (London: British Museum Press, 2003). Man, who derives her information from Michael Sullivan’s earlier study of 1984, introduces some minor errors about authorship and dating. It is now recognized that the scroll, painted in a pre-Tang style, is likely to date from the second half of the fifth century if not later, instead of in Gu Kaizhi’s lifetime (c. 344–c. 406). Attributions aside, the fact that the target of the instructress’s admonitions is another woman (the historic Empress Jia 賈皇后 of Jin, 257–300) makes it an interesting case of how one woman was pitted against another, a common tactic of division in the Confucian moral tradition.

attributed to Gu, the *Nymph of the Luo River* 洛神賦圖, Man discerns a simple “delicate and linear style” (p. xvii) that imparts an “ephemeral” air (p. 34) onto the female figures.<sup>6</sup> This is not to Man’s liking; these lean depictions represent for her “a strict suppression of bodily desires” in Song and Ming neo-Confucian discourses (p. 95). In contrast, she prefers the full-bodied nudes in modern European paintings as the untrammelled expression of female sensuality (pp. 95–96; cf. p. 123).

Although Man’s affirmation of female sensuality is admirable, her interpretations of the *Admonitions* scroll and *Nymph of the Luo River* may change if she views them not by modern Western standards but in the context of the long history of the evolution of figure paintings in the Chinese tradition. Art historian John Hay, for example, suggests that the long fluttering ribbons that dance around the nymph’s body are visual codes not only of her sensuousness but also of the poet-prince’s (i.e., the viewer’s) amorous desires for her.<sup>7</sup> Visual expressions of female sensuality, in the so-called lineal style and others, abound in the late Ming. The exquisite full-coloured illustrations for the *Story of the Western Wing* 西廂記 (1640) executed by print artist Min Qiji 閔齊伋 constitute one of many examples.<sup>8</sup> Even more deserving of analysis is the burgeoning genre of paintings of beautiful women (*meiren hua* 美人畫) by Qing urban studio artists.

The late art historian James Cahill had organized a recent exhibition of these paintings of beautiful women, thus bringing into public view a genre of vernacular paintings previously slighted by art historians.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the time is ripe for teams of art historians and literary scholars to analyse these paintings together with the inexpensive woodblock imprints (of fiction, guidebooks, and pictures) that circulated in the mass-market urban milieu from a gendered perspective. Eva Man has made a commendable beginning with this intermedial project in her study of the *Plum in the Golden Vase* 金瓶梅 in the context of the *Admonitions* scroll. The degree to which the Confucian moral philosophy expounded by the literati-scholars found its way to the

<sup>6</sup> Man’s translation of the title of the second painting is *The Fairy of the Lo River*. I use the more common translation here.

<sup>7</sup> John Hay, “The Body Invisible in Chinese Art?,” in *Body, Subject, and Power in China*, ed. Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 42–77.

<sup>8</sup> These illustrations are now in the Museum of Far Eastern Art in Cologne, Germany. Some of these prints are studied in a general analysis of sensuality as a novel bodily experience of things in the Ming-Qing period. See Jonathan Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces: The Decorative Object in Early Modern China* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> The exhibition catalogue is *Beauty Revealed: Images of Women in Qing Dynasty Chinese Painting* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2013). See also James Cahill, *Pictures for Use and Pleasure: Vernacular Painting in High Qing China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010).

lower reaches of society and its minimally educated men and women is an important issue that deserves investigation.

In this intermedial study of vernacular paintings, prints, and texts, one of the most important questions to ask is the nature of the “male gaze” which, as Man reminds us, “has been so penetrating” in China (p. 89). The issue exceeds the positing of a benign “mutual gaze” between the prince and nymph as *depicted in a painting* (p. 40). What requires extended investigation is the nature of spectatorship itself, or the power dynamics between the viewer and the works of art, be they the *Instructress*, the *Nymph*, or He Chengyao’s body art performances. What kind of art engenders a spectatorship that perpetuates the domineering male gaze, and what kind of art engenders a spectatorship that neutralizes or short-circuits this unequal power relationship between the viewer and the work of art?

The challenge, as feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey reminds us, is to recognize the existing discriminations in a society or a culture that facilitate a passive female image, or a “to-be-looked-at-ness” of female characters in art.<sup>10</sup> Even *female* viewers are susceptible to looking at the world with a “male gaze.” In light of this complex power dynamics, no work of art or text exists as unmediated reflection of “the real woman” or “the female perspective.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, what we have learned from Eva Man’s pioneering book is the intricate and enduring entanglements between male and female desires in the Confucian tradition, beginning with the *Book of Songs*, and perhaps in modern China as well, that preclude a simplistic view of the “real” women in China.

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<sup>10</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975), pp. 6–18. She distinguishes between two modes of male gaze, the voyeuristic and the fetishistic, in her study of female characters in 1950s and 1960s Hollywood films. This article is often cited as the *locus classicus* of the male gaze. It is important to understand the world of avant-garde feminist dancers and performance artists in the 1960s that inspired Mulvey, especially the New York feminist dancer and filmmaker Yvonne Rainer who used humour, melodrama, collages, and other innovative means to short-circuit the male gaze. For an introduction, see Carrie Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> I would suggest that the same is true for works of literature as well. Therefore, it is difficult to argue that the writings of Feng Xiaoqing 馮小青, which are likely to be made up by male writers in the seventeenth century to begin with, represent “the mental state, sexual repression . . . of women in Feudal China, particularly members of the female literati” (p. 173). Similarly, it is difficult to contend that the brothel manual *Hunru pian*, written by men to entice other male readers, “depict[s] some *real* scenes of prostitution where genuine love and passion do exist” (p. 193; emphasis mine). This could well be the case, but further investigations into texts in the same genre or from the same period are necessary.