

A COMPARATIVE CULTURAL STUDY OF THE "BODY" IN CHINESE AND WESTERN SCHOLARSHIP

Wei Guo
Institute of Chinese Vernacular Culture
College of Literature and Journalism
Sichuan University
donghaisisheng@qq.com

Peina Zhuang
Institute of Chinese Vernacular Culture
College of Literature and Journalism
Sichuan University
alison19831208@163.com

Abstract

The body has become a research hotspot, attracting the attention of scholars in the fields of anthropology, literature, philosophy, sociology, and aesthetics. During this process, traditional Chinese and Western views on the body changed in varying degrees, and new corporeal theories came to the forefront. This article, based on the analytical overview of the comparative cultural studies of the body in Chinese scholarship, points out that problems are still abound and there is much room left for body studies in the future, as testified by the deficiencies in the status quo, such as the repeated usage of keywords in research, a lack of the synchronic comparison, and the blind and rigid application of concepts about the "Other." The paper argues that only by solving these problems can comparative studies about the body reveal the cultural differences between Chinese and Western corporeal theory and thereby achieve real mutual elaboration.

Keywords

body; Merleau-Ponty; Yang Rubin; Confucianism; Mencius

About the Authors

Wei Guo teaches classical Chinese literature in Sichuan University, and his research areas include cultural studies, Buddhist studies and the corporeal theory. His latest publication is "Ecophobia, Hollow Ecology, and the Chinese Concept of Tianren Heyi," in *ISLE-Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (2019).

Peina Zhuang teaches comparative literature in Sichuan University, and her research areas include comparative literature, cultural studies, and the corporeal theory. She has published articles in international journals and her latest publication is "Desire and the Body in Zhao's *The Anthropocene*" in *Neohelicon* (January 2020).

A COMPARATIVE CULTURAL STUDY OF THE "BODY" IN CHINESE AND WESTERN SCHOLARSHIP

The body in recent years has acquired the status of an "Archimedean fulcrum," where studies on issues such as the body and gender, the body and colonization, the body and consumption, the body and high-tech, and so on are conducted. As a result, there have been great changes to the traditional views of the body, both Eastern and Western, thus giving rise to new corporeal terms and concepts such as "the incarnation," "the political body," "the cultural body," "bodily natures," and "the mirror body." This article states that problems abound in current studies by Chinese scholarship, since these studies tend to repeat and copy each other, pay no attention to the comparison from the synchronic perspective, and mechanically apply concepts from the West in the elaboration of classical Chinese views on the body. We argue that only by overcoming these deficiencies will real mutual elucidation be possible in comparative cultural studies of the body between China and the West. Otherwise, comparative corporeal studies will only showcase theories from either side.

Comparative Chinese-Western corporeal studies have grown in recent years. These studies are a good site to explore the heterogeneity in philosophy, society, aesthetics, medicine, and so forth between China and the West, since "theorizing about the body shows that bodies are not only natural entities but also cultural concepts. There are many body metaphors in contemporary society" (Zhang 8). An overview of the current research of Chinese scholarship reveals several things.

The majority of comparative cultural corporeal studies center on theoretical issues that reveal essential differences between Chinese and Western discourses, philosophical views, and cultural symbols about the body. For instance, Yasuo Yuasa's article "The Body of Qi in East Asian Philosophy and Science—A Comparative Study with the West," states that

the word 'body' in English refers not only to the human body but also to physical objects. In the Eastern philosophical and scientific traditions, everything is regarded as a container of the energy of qi (breath, energy). So, the energy of qi is not only related to the body and mind but also to the environment. The East and the West, on this point, have strong diachronic differences. (94)

Thus, it is the essential differences in the metaphysical traditions and the cultural contexts that have led to the various interpretations of the body in China and the West.

Jiang Yi's article entitled "A Comparison of the Chinese and Western Philosophical Views on the Body and Its Implications" (2015) offers a review of the meaning of the term "body" in Confucian, Taoist, and Western traditional contexts. It points out that the study of the body by Chinese philosophers highlights the characteristics of Chinese philosophy, which understands the concept of the "body" mainly as "life" and "activity." Western philosophers, on the other hand, understand the body as an object or subject. Therefore, a comparison of corporeal concepts can reveal important differences between Chinese and Western corporeal philosophies.

Zhang Zailin, a well-known Chinese scholar of classical Chinese body studies, summarizes the differences between traditional Chinese and Western views of the body in his article "I Have a Body and I Am the Body— A Comparison of the Chinese and Western Views of the Body" (2015). The Chinese view is as follows: "I have a body." The Western view is different: "I am the body." The former advocates for an object-based body in the scientific sense, while the latter emphasizes an ontological body in the philosophical sense. The former is a non-self-sufficient and individual body, a body of "dichotomy of form and spirit," and the latter, a self-sufficient and interactive body, "with form and spirit" (Zhang 120). Zhang also discusses the development of modern Western views about the body and compares Merleau-Ponty's views with those from traditional Chinese culture.

Wang Chao, in his article "The Heterogeneous Forms of Chinese and Western Body Views and Their Poetic Origins" (2018), discusses the differences between the "body symbols" in Chinese and Western corporeal theories from the perspective of cultural poetics and argues that the nude symbol in Western culture unobtrusively emerges as an aesthetic object full of tension (87). Chinese culture advocates for a corporeal notion that puts mind over body.

Other similar studies also set their focus on ancient Chinese philosophy, and articles such as "The Body in Ancient Chinese Cosmology," "The Meaning of the Body in Classical Chinese Philosophy," "The Chinese Philosophical Body Thinking," and "The Body View of Qi in East Asian Philosophy and Science" all put forward the idea that the mind and body are a pair of "polarities," ancient Chinese philosophy being a philosophy of bodily nature. Comparative cultural studies also pay attention to the differences in corporeal views in medicine, sports, and other professions in China and the West. Books on ancient Chinese corporeal philosophy include comparative studies on Chinese and Western views. For instance, Yang Rubin divides the Confucian view of the body in the pre-Qin period into two origins and three schools in his book *The Confucian View of the Body* (1996). Yang borrows Merleau-Ponty's "body subject" to explain Confucianism's formulation of the body, arguing that

If we take the body as a common name, we can say that the traditional Confucian view of the body has four meanings: the body of consciousness, the body of form, the body of natural qi, and the body of society, which are different from each other, since each of them has the mind and qi infiltrated into it, so any one of them has the status as the subject. Therefore, we can say that the term is 'body subject.' The name of subject can include the body of consciousness, the body of form and energy representing the inner and outer sides of the body, the body of nature, and the body of culture representing the system of the social norms. (9)

Yang also borrows from British anthropologist Mary Douglas' theory of the body and argues that Xunzi's view is quite similar to that of Douglas, since both regard the social body as a direction for understanding the physical expression of human beings.

The section titled "Body and Mind in Comparative Cultural Perspectives" in Zhou Yucheng's *Body: Thought and Cultivation* (2005) introduces the body view of Yasuo Yuasa, who holds that Western philosophy is concerned with the body-mind relationship, while Eastern philosophy focuses on the "why and how" side. Zhou points out that Yasuo Yuasa's discussion is not confined to the realm of literature and aesthetics but draws on theories from various schools of thought. Yasuo Yuasa experiments with different approaches, proposes concepts such as "explicit consciousness" and "hidden consciousness," and discusses the qualities and similarities of Chinese and Western corporeal views from the perspectives of neurophysiology, psychoanalysis, existentialism, and medicine (Zhou 26). Zhou points out that Yasuo Yuasa's study is strongly Westernized and inevitably a bit "compartmentalized." The section of "A Comparison of Physicality: Ancient Greece and Ancient China" discusses the differences between the objective perceptions of the physical body in ancient Greece and ancient China. This section argues that ancient China centered more on a weak body in physical exercise and sports, and consequently the poetry, sculpture, and architecture of ancient China could not reach the heights achieved in ancient Greece (ibid). Such differences can be attributed to natural, humanistic, and social factors.

Shigehisa Kuriyama, in his book *The Language of the Body: The Mystery of the Body from Chinese and Western Cultures* (2009), examines the "expressiveness" of the body in ancient Chinese and Greek cultures from three perspectives: "the pulse," "the way of observation," and "the different views on 'blood' and 'wind'" (breathing) in Chinese and Greek medicine (1). The different cultural senses and their respective search for the truth of human existence have resulted in very different views of the body, mainly in terms of the meaning and the state of the body, and the purpose of examining the body. It is clear that the differences between ancient China and Greece are not only theoretical but also stem from the different ways of feeling in the body,

though the recent decades have witnessed changing concepts about the body in the West, changes more resembling Chinese views.

Traditionally, Chinese culture views the human body as an integral part of nature, as in the concept of "Tianren Heyi" ("天人合一", the unity of man and heaven). The process of industrialization both in China and the West ran counter to this concept, and only in recent years did people come to realize the consequences of exploiting nature. They turned to promoting the importance of harmoniously co-existing with nature, an act that illustrates Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality. Trans-corporeality is about the inter-connectedness of the human body with nature, and it makes us rethink the

boundaries of our persons as well as our notions of safety and normalcy. The chemically reactive manifest a corporeality that is always already trans-corporeal, as they help us to envision the invisible movement of xenobiotic substances across human bodies and more-than-human nature...Such a realization recasts human health as a matter of environmental health, broadly conceived—as the human is substantially coextensive with the rest of the world. (Alaimo 124-125)

A comparison between concepts of trans-corporeality and Tianren Heyi, for instance, can make a book such as *The Language of the Body* more vivid and insightful.

Wu Kuang-ming's English monograph *On Chinese Body Thinking: A Cultural Hermeneutics* (1997) sets a new standard by introducing the term "body thinking" and gives the reader a fresh look at the thought of Western philosophers such as Plato, Descartes, Kant, Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. Wu shows the reader what this "body thinking" really is and also confirms its uniqueness by comparing it with Western thinking on the topic. He asserts that our "bodies" are not empirical bodies under the "mind-body dichotomy" but are materialities. Such a view is similar to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body, but is unique because it is more universal. Wu groups his ideas into six categories: "demonstratives," "affirmatives," "negatives," "metaphorical," "implicit," and "ironic" (1). Furthermore, in comparative analysis, he never directly quotes the ideas of his Western counterparts but rather critically solicits them while trying to avoid the direct application of Western terminology and thinking to Chinese corporeal theory. Although the book is difficult to understand, it is nonetheless a "revolutionary" work of Chinese corporeal theory, and its comparative study is an important source of reference for future research.

Though we cannot deny the progress made in comparative cultural studies in Chinese corporeal theory, problems still abound and there is much room left for

future studies. Firstly, the studies for the moment are repetitive. Based on a review of the current statistics, most comparative studies now cite Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body, which is not wrong, but seem far from enough to comprehensively compare Chinese and Western corporeal theory. Views and theories about the body from both sides have a long history, and though we cannot deny the importance of Merleau-Ponty, the issue of the body has been elaborated under different perspectives from the very beginning of Western intellectual history.

Two prominent examples are the works of Chris Shilling and Mikhail Bakhtin, which are highly relevant to the key issues of comparing the body in today's high-tech society. The boundary between the body and nature has grown increasingly unclear in society since, as Shilling explains, "the more we can control and change the boundaries of the body, the less certain we are about what constitutes the individual body and what the natural properties of the body are" (Shilling 3). The boundary of the human body is thus blurred and should be reconceptualized. It is inseparable from nature that

can no longer be imagined as a pliable resource for the industrial production or social construction. Nature is agentic...We need ways of understanding the agency, significance, and ongoing transformative power of the world. (Alaimo and Hekman 5)

Moreover, most studies focus on the exploration and discussion of the views of either China *or* the West, while a two-way comparison seems fragmented and single, usually as articles rather than in books.

Another deficiency in current studies is the "misalignment" of comparison, or the lack of synchronic comparison. For example, Yang Rubin applies the phenomenology of the body to ancient Chinese Confucian and Taoist views of the body but does not analyze the qualities and differences of modern Chinese and Western corporeal views. The modern Chinese view has changed greatly under the influence of Western social, aesthetic, and philosophical trends.

One more problem in the research by Chinese scholarship is the "rigid application" of corporeal concepts from the West. A major feature of current comparative studies of Chinese and Western views is the use of Western concepts to interpret ancient Chinese views. In the process of comparison, it is often easy to exaggerate the similarities and ignore the differences, taking one side as the standard for comparison. For example, Yang Rubin borrows Merleau-Ponty's "body subject" concept to explain Confucianism's expressions about the body. Yang argues that if we take the body as a common name, then we can say that the traditional Confucian view of the body should have four meanings: the body of consciousness, the body of form, the body of natural qi, and the body of society (9). In Yang's view, the four sides of the body are

inseparable, and all of them refer to the body, only by different names. We can also see that the Confucian view of the body—both Mencius' view and Xunzi's view—means that the body is either an objective entity that requires external ritual teaching and cultivation in order to "beautify the body" or is an obstacle to morality, thus not a Merleau-Ponty type of body subject. The "body subject" is based on the subject with perceptual capacity, where the body itself has perception, and its actions do not need to occur through the objective world.

Where the Confucian school differs from Merleau-Ponty's "body subject" is that the body is not the body subject. For example, Mencius divides the body into "大体" (mind) and "小体" (body), and his view generally emphasizes the metaphysical "will" rather than the metaphysical "body." The corporeal body in his intellectual system does not have initiative and activeness, so we have the Chinese phrase "舍生取义" (give up the body or life for righteousness), which is different from the "body subject." The root of this lies in the Chinese metaphysics of the mind—in other words, "the break among mind, temperament, and the body logically leads to the suppression of the body by the mind, which is contrary to the original purpose of the unity of mind and body" (Zhou 443), as has been elaborated by Chinese scholars.

Zhou Yushen, in his review of the research by Yasuo Yuasa, points out that Yuasa's research is like that of a Westerner who knows something but not the whole picture or the real essence of Eastern culture. There is nothing wrong with using Western studies as a reference system to examine the qualities of Chinese corporeal theory, but it must be done with the recognition of the place of such scholarship in Chinese culture and its evolutionary trajectory. In this way, such studies can become an important source for the construction of a contemporary Chinese view of the body. Otherwise, such studies will easily become one-sided.

Thus, although Wu, in his book *The Chinese Body Thinking*, claims to avoid Western terminology as much as possible, his use of terms such as "demonstratives" betrays this claim. It is the ancient view of the body that he talks about more. Therefore, the study of the body is more like "reflexive" research in Chinese scholarship. Chinese corporeal theory needs to figure out how to make good use of such "reflexive" research. The primary step should be to clarify and compare the meanings of the English term "body" and the Chinese term "body" (身体) as well as related terms in China and the West. Terms such as "气" (breath, energy), "性" (temperament), "道" (Tao), "body," "corpus," "corporeal," "mind," and "nuda vita" all carry rich cultural connotations and demonstrate the characteristics of the body in China and the West. As for comparative corporeal studies, feasible options include comparisons under certain disciplines and periods of time. For instance, comparative corporeal studies from the perspective of gender between China and the West can analyze the different views or customs about the female body, such as foot binding in China and corsetry in the West, together with

corporeal theories of scholars such as Michel Foucault. Foucault holds that the body inscribes history, and history destroys and shapes the body (20). Foot-binding, for instance, is a synonym for the backwardness of pre-modern China, though Westerners have their own counterpart for this—namely, the emergence of corsetry in sixteenth century Europe. The corset was a symbol of “beauty” and “the sublime” that came from things that stimulate our sense of pain and danger (Burke 78).

The dilemma we now find ourselves in by rigidly following Western views largely arises from our neglect of the rich reservoir in the classical Chinese views on the body. Cao Shunqing proposed the theory of “aphasia” to describe the rigid application of the Western literary theory in elaborating the classical Chinese literary theory. “Aphasia” here indicates the lack of a systematic discourse on poetics, which is also a problem with classical Chinese corporeal theory. This theory constitutes a significant dimension of traditional Chinese culture. For instance, “both the Confucians’ rebuilding of the social order and the Taoists’ apprehension of Dao (the way of nature) start from the self’s sensual apprehension” (Xu 5). We need to adjust and theorize these views on the body.

Current comparative corporeal studies in China and the West clearly are not in good communication with each other. Most comparative studies for the present can only be categorized as attempts to explore and elaborate the views on the body from one scholar or from one side, either of ancient China or the West. Only by being aware of and overcoming these problems can comparative corporeal studies synthesize theories from China and the West and create meaningful insights in the areas of anthropology, colonialism, Anthropocene, consumption, industry, and technology in the future.

Notes

1. Peina Zhuang: the corresponding author.
2. Research for "Critiques on the Comparative Cultural Studies of the 'Body' between China and the West in Chinese Scholarship" is funded by the Double First-Class Discipline Cluster of the Chinese Language and Literature and the Global Dissemination of Chinese Culture.

Works Cited

- Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures*. Indiana UP, 2010.
- Alaimo, Stacy, and Susan Hekman. *Material Feminism*. Indiana UP, 2008.
- Bakhtin, Michael. *Complete Works of Bakhtin* (vol.6). Translated by Li Zhaolin and Xia Zhongxian, Hebei Education Press, 1988.
- Kuriyama, Shigehisa. *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine*. MIT Press, 1999.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson Smith, Basil Blackwell, 1992.
- Jiang, Yi. "A Comparison of the Chinese and Western Philosophical Views on the Body and Its Implications" (中西哲学身体观之比较及其启示). *Modern Philosophy*, no. 6, 2015, pp. 79-84.
- Mauss, Marcel. *Sociology and Anthropology: Essays*. Routledge, 1979.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Structure of Behavior*. Translated by Alden L. Fisher, Beacon Press, 1963.
- . *The Primacy of Perception*. Translated by James M. Edie, Northwestern UP, 1973.
- . *Phenomenology of Perception*. Routledge, 2002.
- Punday, Daniel. *Narrative Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Narratology*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Shilling, Chris. *The Body and Social Theory*. Sage, 2003.
- Tao, Dongfeng. "The Body in the Consumption Culture" (消费文化中的身体). *Guizhou Social Science*, no. 11, 2007, pp. 43-50.
- Tang, Meiyang, and Wang Gang. "Comparison of the Differences between Chinese Wushu and Western Sports from the Perspective of the Body" (身体视角下中国武术与西方体育的差异性比较). *China Sport Science*, no. 3, 2014, pp. 82-87.
- Wang, Chao. "The Heterogeneous Forms of the Chinese and Western Body Views and Their Poetic Origins" (中西身体观异质形态及其诗学渊源). *Journal of Xinjiang University (Philosophy, Humanities & Social Sciences)*, no. 5, 2018, pp. 87-93.
- Wu, Kuang-ming. *On Chinese Body Thinking: A Cultural Hermeneutics*. E.J. Brill, 1997.
- Xu, Zong. "The Cultural Connotations and Modern Significance of the Classical Chinese Body View" (中国古代身体观念的文化内涵与现代意义). *Jiangnan Tribune*, no. 3, 2012, pp. 5-14.
- Yang, Rubin. *Qi Theory and View on the Body in Ancient Chinese Thought* (《中国古代思想中的气论及身体观》). Juliu, 2009.
- Yang, Rubin. *The Confucian View of the Body* (《儒家身体观》). Institute of Chinese Literature, History and Philosophy, Academia Sinica, 1996.
- Yasuo Yuasa. "The Body of Qi in East Asian Philosophy and Science—A Comparative Study with the West." ("气之身体观在东亚哲学与科学中的探讨——及其与西洋的比较考察"). *Qi Theory and View on the Body in Ancient Chinese Thought* (《中国古代思想中的气论及身体观》). Edited by Yang Rubin, Juliu, 2009, pp. 90-98.

- Zhang, Jinfeng. *The Body* (《身体》). Foreign Language Teaching and Researching Press, 2019.
- Zhang, Zailin. "I Have a Body and I Am the Body - a Comparison of the Chinese and Western Views of the Body" ("我有一个身体" 与 "我是身体" —中西身体观之比较). *Philosophical Research*, no.6, 2015, pp.120–126.
- Zhou, Yucheng. *The Body and Mind in Comparative Cultural Perspectives* (《身体：思想与修行以中国经典为中心的跨文化关照》). China Social Sciences Press, 2005.