



The Body in Asia

Review by D. S. FARRER

The Body in Asia by Bryan S. Turner and Zheng Yangwen eds. Asia Pacific Studies Vol. 3, Berghahn: New York and Oxford, 2009. 230 pp, 17 plates, \$90.00.

The Body in Asia is a *tour de force* of the interdisciplinary study of the body and embodiment as applied to contemporary and historic Asia. Contributors enter the fray through various discourses including sociology, social and cultural anthropology, Asian Studies, East Asian Studies, ethno-history, and human geography. This edited volume emerged from a 2007 conference held at the National University of Singapore's Asia Research Institute entitled "The Body in Asia: Cosmos and Canvas." Turner and Zhangwen's introduction (1-21) "Piety, Politics and Philosophy: Asia and the Global Body" outlines their conceptual framework to identify and address the key issues of mind-body, performance, women, religion, and pollution, providing a neat summary and update of Turner's earlier groundbreaking research read alongside recent developments. Susan Brownell mixes metaphors in the first essay "The Global Body Cannot Ignore Asia" to address the issue of orientalism. Any charges of orientalism, Brownell insists, must be historically contextualized and contingent. Brownell hopes that "this volume can contribute toward using the study of the body to arrive at more complex and accurate understandings of cultural differences, as well as of the bodily humanity that we all share" (39). The remaining nine chapters are divided into three sections: The Body and Religion, The Body and Culture, and the Body and the State. Areas featured in the volumes include China, Japan, Indonesia, West Java, the Philippines and India.

The volume provides a welcome summary of the fast growing literature and introduces a wealth of Asian empirical, ethnographic, and historic data throughout the chapters. Comparatively scant attention, however, is paid to research methods. For many of the essays even the minimum methodological requirements—such as, for example, the time periods when fieldwork was conducted and the length of immersion—are absent. This is unfortunate, if not a little ironic, in a book on "the body" because the *absent* researcher's body is precisely a trope of earlier disembodied colonial narratives that embodiment as a methodological device aims to abridge, supplement or displace (Csordas 2002: 7). Nonetheless, despite minor flaws, the book challenges readers to rethink their own body and the bodies around them in everyday life and provides an excellent introduction into the sociology of the body and the anthropology of embodiment.

Body and Religion

The volume's first section contains three essays commencing with Monika Dix's examination of the engendering of the female body in medieval Japanese Buddhist narratives; fasting and the creation of religious bodies in West Java by Jürgen Hellman; and veiling, piety and the "citizen-subject" in contemporary Indonesia by Sonja van Wichelen.

Monika Dix (43-58) in "Saint or Serpent? Engendering the Female Body in Medieval Japanese Buddhist Narratives" interrogates Buddhist texts concerning the possibility of females attaining enlightenment, where first they must transform into a dragon and then into a man, because "male sexuality is the prerequisite for salvation" (43). Via an "exegesis" primarily of the medieval Japanese didactic Buddhist tales *Dojoji* and *Kegon engi emaki*, Dix enquires why females are required to undergo metamorphosis in order to attain enlightenment. Dix utilizes an interdisciplinary approach to the problem, straddling the discourses of literature, religion, cultural studies, and gender studies—only to read the myths through the lens of psychoanalysis. Interdisciplinary studies, however, share the advantages and disadvantages of methodological triangulation—where, provided the researcher gets it just right, the account is strengthened in terms of validity and reliability. Alternatively, the deep focus of one avenue of enquiry is lost in the mud as the scholar wades through the shallow waters of the other approaches. Perhaps Dix's essay would improve if she focused upon more recent literature emerging from psychoanalysis. Dix could at least have reassured the reader that no ethnocentrism is intended in foisting a top down Western model of psychological phallocentrism on an issue concerning Japanese Buddhist women. Nevertheless her essay does tackle the important issue of women's religious salvation in Buddhism, and contributes to psychoanalysis, and to the problem of the body in social and cultural practices through identifications of institutionalized albeit unconscious religious and cultural sexism.

Jürgen Hellman's impressive essay (59-74) "Creating Religious Bodies: Fasting Rituals in West Java" recounts a host of Javanese ritual fasting practices "to explore how bodies are created and honed through religious practice" (59). Ritual fasting leads to a "specific edification of the body which enables the transformation of control and subjugation into empowerment," i.e. the individual learns to control their impulses, appetite and desire (*nafsu*). For Hellman the Javanese body is moulded into a religious tool through religious, sociocultural, and ritual practices aimed at harnessing the power of *kesaktian* [which I should point out derives from the root word *sakti* or magic] (60). Following Ortner (2006) Hellman says through "reflexivity" social actors can transfer power attained in one realm into another, from ritual to social or political power (*ibid.*). Hellman criticizes previous accounts of *kesaktian* as abstract studies concerned with mysticism, power, focus, insight, and enlightenment, whereas his innovation is to discuss *how* power is attained over the body through fasting.

Fasting (*puasa*) is designed to learn to control the body and not to just regulate food intake. The body is regarded as analogous to the *wadah* (literally, container), a sum of parts built, reinforced, and filled with knowledge at the same time it is emptied of food and desire; a container that provides the "gateway" to "other cosmological realms," providing the individual and the community ways "to attain religious experiences in dimensions of reality that are only perceptible after prolonged education of the body" (64). Hellman does not provide details of the participant observation or stipulate how long, if ever, he fasted. He constructs his account by identifying the underlying discourse of three informants and allowing them to speak through his narrative, where, for example, Ibu Hajj explains "praying and fasting sharpens the senses and

makes communication with other people and with God easier” (67). The person needs to “make room” or “be empty” in order to receive “supernatural gifts” such as miraculous assistance in times of need. Hellman informs us that fasting “is not about depriving the body of food, but it is about teaching oneself not to eat more than necessary and not before one ‘needs’ to.... to become master of one’s desires” (68). Ramadan and other Islamic fasts exist alongside traditional Javanese fasts (that may or may not be permitted) including “Ngeblang (continuous fasting without breaking the fast each night), Mutih (eating only plain rice and drinking water), Ngalong (a fruit diet), Ngeplong (continuous fasting for three days without breaking)” (71). Powers acquired through fasting transfer into prestige, and may be used “to heal and possess people” (72). Thus Hellman concludes that via “submission” to fasting “the creation of the body as gateway/container is the first step in achieving agency” (73-4).

Sonja van Wichelen’s (75-94) lucid account of “Formations of Public Piety: New Veiling, the Body, and the Citizen-Subject in Contemporary Indonesia” presents women veiling up in Indonesia despite the former pariah, lower class, *kampungun* (village) status of the veil. Wichelen’s essay proceeds through an implicit semiotic analysis of a photograph of homogenous girls in white virginal veils at a rally protesting the French ban of the veil. One female protestor holds aloft a sign proclaiming her love for the veil, proclaiming, “*Jilbab*, I’m in ♥.” For Wichelen the sign signifies a type of “girl power” where the girl defines “the meaning and practices of her religion” as opposed to Islam being defined by the Qur’an (85). Wearing the veil has become trendy and indeed normal for the teenage girls following its promotion in teenage magazines featuring Indonesian celebrities who sport designer versions of the veil. Citing Lila Abu-Lughod (1995) Wichelen says the “new Muslim middle class” in Indonesia have opted “for an ‘alternative modernity’” (90) akin to the global Islamic commercialization and commodification of leisure and consumption everywhere (91). Wichelen claims that the Muslim discipline of the female body compares to the Western disciplined female body with its obsessive “diet and fitness culture” (93). Wichelen concludes that the Indonesian public sphere is being reconfigured through Muslim (pious) middle class gendered subjectivities (94).

Body and Culture

In the second section of the volume Junko Ishiguru presents Western and Japanese ideas of female desirability in Japanese magazines; followed by Ann Lora-Wainwright’s discussion of fatness, well-being and the generation gap in China.

Junko Ishiguru (97-111) in “Westernized Body or Japanese Western Body: The Desirable Female Body in Women’s Magazines” addresses changes in “beauty ideology” from a comparative study of representations of Japanese and Western women’s bodies as revealed in Japanese magazines. Ishiguru investigated a leading Japanese magazine, *anan*, to examine the cover feature of 1,392 issues published from 1970-2003 (98), and conducted interviews among students as part of her doctoral research. Ishiguru navigates complex Western literature on race, sex, cultural imperialism, stereotypes, domestication, and global culture to make the now familiar case for the “active consumer” where “the audience are not simply passive ‘cultural dupes’ but... [construct] the meaning in their own right” (99). Apparently in the 1960s Western white women were represented as “sexy” in comparison to Japanese women who were seen as “healthy” (plump). During the 1970s a white version of beauty gained supremacy “typically represented as a well balanced body with a small face, big eyes, long eyelashes and slim legs” (101). Hence, following Stuart Hall (1992), Ishiguru declares: “Races do not exist outside of

representation but are formed in and by it in a process of social and political power struggle (102) where stereotypes of Western and Japanese women are essentialized to occupy opposing poles of dominance and inferiority. With the fitness boom in the 1980s the round, plump previously healthy (if “non-normative”) Japanese body began to be regarded as “fat.” For Ishiguru from 1979 the non-normative body could no longer be tolerated in women’s magazines (105). By the 1990s the western bodily form is indigenized in Japan alongside the disappearance of exclusively Western-oriented images of the body (108) replaced by tall, slim, Japanese models with long legs and a Japanese “round face” (*ibid.*), thus “Japanizing the Western body” (109). Ishiguru asserts that although the “Caucasian standard of beauty has become globalized” in magazines a new local indigenization occurs. Further research, Ishiguru concludes, is required to investigate “the phenomenon... of women still being compelled to aspire to the Western body either directly or to its approximation in indigenized form” (110).

Herself considered fat in China, Ann Lora-Wainwright (113-126) in “Fatness and Well-being: Bodies and the Generation Gap in Contemporary China” examines “perceptions of fatness in rural China,” and questions intergenerational perceptions of the body and health, and negotiations of “taste” at the table. Through an ethnographic study conducted in a village roughly 300 km from Chengdu commenced in 2004 (for fifteen months) Lora-Wainwright analyses data provided by villagers, particularly her host family (father, mother, daughter) and their mother-in-law. Lora-Wainwright acknowledges a debt to Thomas Csordas who “promoted the concept of embodiment... to overcome the dichotomy between the body as an object of ideology and the body as an experiencing subject,” but criticizes his (supposed) lack of attention to “social structures and social reproduction” (115). Hence Lora-Wainwright boldly jettisons the concept of “embodiment” to substitute it with “attitudes to the body” or “bodily dispositions,” apparently to better approach “socio-historic processes by which bodily attitudes are formed and contested” (116).

Lora-Wainwright’s elder informants related experiences of famine and starvation under the collective canteens of Mao’s Great Leap Forward (until 1961), only to be dismissed by grandchildren who said they were “lazy and left it to the others to work” (118). Whereas the elders had been satisfied with corn bread and boasted of a bowl of steamed rice, the “little emperors” born in the years of relative affluence demand biscuits and chocolate. Here Lora-Wainwright introduces Bourdieu’s (1984) distinction between the “taste of necessity” developed for filling and economic foods quick to reproduce labor power, and the “taste of luxury” produced by living under conditions of affluence (120) where taste is understood to be embodied in class differences, themselves reproduced through taste (121). Lora-Wainwright acknowledges that a narrative of communalism displaced by market reform, of poverty displaced by plenty, is primarily an ideological device in a country divided by the rural-urban inequalities of uneven development (124). As Lora-Wainwright articulates in conclusion: “My contribution highlights that corporeal experience is inseparable from the state’s intervention in villagers’ daily lives” (125)—an acknowledgment that squarely places her chapter in the *next* section on the Body and State. To better fit this section on Body and Culture Lora-Wainwright should have stressed inequality within the family alongside issues of social change; however, either her sample was insufficient, or her gaze too macro to account for who is served what, when, and how, leaving the reader to wonder who cooks, shops, and does the dishes, and how this has changed (as surely it has) since the days of communalism.

Body and State

The final section contains four essays including Denis Gainty's research concerning the Japanese body and martial arts; Julius Bautista and Ma. Mercedes Planta's account of the sacred, sanitary, and medicalized Filipino Body; Santhosh Raghavan Nair's rendition of religious contestation and new human subjects; and Zheng Yangwen's vision of women's revolution and ballet in the era of Mao Zedong.

The opening statement of Denis Gainty's (129-146) "*Seki Juroji and the Japanese Body: Martial Arts, Kukutai, and Citizen-State Relations in Meiji Japan*" lacks translucence, which stands in stark contrast to the admirable clarity of the following sections that are informative, concise and clear. Key themes are power and agency in the embodiment of the nation state. Foucault's concern with the body and state as an overarching envelope embracing individuals and societies from the top down is reversed to provide a discussion of agency. Gainty shows how individual martial advocates (practitioners?) embodied "popular agency" (138) to influence social and educational policies after the Meiji period. Seki's writings, in particular are elucidated alongside the role of the Nippon Budokai—to demonstrate how Samurai arts were appropriated by the masses (that was to some extent their very appeal). The *bu-bun* (in Chinese *wen-wu* "literary attainment–martial virtues") distinction is a common theme of Asian states responding to "bestial" European colonial powers (Jie 2011). A discussion of the research methods employed is neglected. The where, when, and how of this research should have been addressed. Instead the reader is left to wonder at the Olympian standpoint of the researcher. Although a historian, Gainty relies heavily on the 1980s "cultural" [*sic*] anthropology of Munn, Kondo and Strathern. To bring the essay up to date, however, the author should have consulted more recent works, especially Alfred Gell's (1998) *Art and Agency*.

Julius Bautista and Ma. Mercedes Planta (147-164) in "The Sacred and the Sanitary: The Colonial 'Medicalization' of the Filipino Body" charts the shift in corporeal regime from the period of Spanish rule to American colonialism. Shifting from Foucauldian concerns with government, surveillance, and discipline, Bautista and Planta narrow the focus to the mundane aspects of daily life such as the rituals of piety/cleanliness imposed by colonial mandate "so that the body may be aligned towards the general ethic of the ruling regime" (148). Spanish rule (1565-1896) dictated bodily discipline and self-surveillance through the friars and their manuals such as the *Lagda*, penned by Father Pedro de Estrada (1734). Here Bautista and Planta note that via "rituals of intimacy" the natives were coaxed into a particular form of pious deportment, placidity, and hygiene—exhorted, for example, not to gape, scratch, or cough openly and to sit still during meals (150). Citing only *en passant* research concerning "modes of resistance" and "the secret practice of native agency" (151), Bautista and Planta note that: "Ironically, it was the *ilustrado* [cosmopolitan local elite] class' attainment of a kind of European 'urbanity' that led to the conditions in which the very legitimacy of friar authority came to be challenged and eroded," with pamphlets parodying the hypocritical, licentious, and debauched behavior of the friars with Filipino women (155). Under the American regime (1899-1946), however, the successful implementation of the "medical paradigm" contrasts to the dismal failure of the Protestant proselytisers, as the Catholics had already successfully occupied the available spiritual terrain. The American focus on public health, personal hygiene, and sanitation was to regulate the body as essentially a medical unit (149), motivated by the fear of sickness and death to control epidemic diseases "such as bubonic plague, cholera, leprosy, and smallpox" (158). Such "civilizing imperialism" provided the justification of empire to the American colonial power in

an era where the military was supplanted by the sanitary inspector (*ibid.*). For Bautista and Planta the American behavioral reforms produced “compliant, docile and manageable subjects” (162) where state agencies ultimately aimed to improve the health of the native population to ensure labor productivity and commercial success (160).

Santhosh Raghavan Nair (165-181), in “State and Religious Contestation over the Body: Hook Swinging and the Production of New Human Subjects,” combines historic and ethnographic research to interrogate an attempt in 2004 to re-enact the hook swinging ritual in Kerala, India. This symbolic ritual sacrifice to the deity Bhagavati (Bhadrakali) “involves the suspension of a devotee’s body from two or more iron hooks pierced through the skin which are hung on the end of long wooden pole that is elevated from a wooden scaffold” (166). With the hooks pierced through the devotee’s back, he is levered into a position suspended from a height of thirty-five feet. Bearers then run around the temple three times carrying the scaffold and its victim aloft. Suppressed as supposedly irrational, primitive, barbaric, and inhuman under the “civilizing mission” of British colonialism, and regarded as a symbolic relic of earlier practices of human sacrifice, Nair suggests that such customs resulted in powerful discourses concerning ritual practices held to be “incompatible with modernity” (*ibid.*). Nair criticizes Foucauldian notions of disciplinary structures creating “docile bodies and new human subjects” as ignoring possibilities of resistance through human subjective agency. Via an “ethnographic note” concerning contemporary hook swinging, he demonstrates the “subjective agency” of the local community resisting “overarching disciplinary structures” (166-8)—in this case represented by opposed Hindu reformist agencies and committees, district officials, the medical examiner, the police commissioner, and the state.

Despite the ban, Nair informs us that the ritual persisted until 1987 in the Elavoor temple and continues to this day elsewhere in South India. Another committee formed against the Elavoor temple committee that attempted to revive the practice, accusing them of wanting to profit from an influx of visitors to the spectacle. The opposition claimed that the substitute *poormodal* ritual (to cover the deity in flowers) was sufficient to appease the deity whose character had in any case now shifted from malevolent to benevolent (170). Nair adroitly weaves a complex tapestry of theoretical, ethnographic, religious, and historical threads. This tapestry shows how discourses of the body amalgamated from Western medicine (concerning pain, infection, and the loss of blood), law and order (raising the possibility of violent communal disorder), and high caste Hindu swamis combined in the rhetoric of the state to dismiss the actions of the devotee volunteers alongside their “outmoded” local notions of massage to loosen the skin prior to piercing and subsequent healing via the application of powdered turmeric (176). The author concludes that 150 years of ongoing bio-power to create docile human bodies is thus resisted by human beings who would apply their own definitions of what is torture, cruelty, and “what it means to be a body” (181). Although this chapter is well written and informative there are enough loose ends to provoke the sceptic. Details of the ethnographic fieldwork (if any) are omitted, no illustration is provided, and the indigenous term and meaning of “hook swinging” is conspicuously absent. And finally, to satisfy Occam’s razor, it must be asked what could possibly be more docile than volunteering to be swung around impaled by iron hooks anyway?

Zheng Yangwen (183-202) presents “Women’s Revolution Embodied in Mao Zedong Era Ballet.” Her rather novel and interesting contribution trails Bryan Turner’s (2006) article on Walter Benjamin and reproducibility, and is littered throughout with quotes drawn from contemporary social theory and works on dance and embodiment, utilising a strategy I dub the “AK47 approach,” where if the author sprays enough theoretical bullets then surely something

will strike. This chapter is set in the era when *Red Girl's Regiment* replaced *Swan Lake*. Zheng indicates the profound irony of that ultimate of bourgeois art forms, ballet, when subjugated to anti-feudal, anti-imperialist patriotic Chinese communism, where women's revolution is promoted, manipulated, and simultaneously subverted under the auspices of Mao's patriarchal power. As Zheng announces, "Communist's feminism did not and could not escape the confines of Confucian tradition" (196). Zheng initially questions if Western theory on the body and embodiment will produce similar or different results in Asia. Sidestepping, Zheng continues: "Leaving aside the issue of western theory [really?]... this chapter explores Mao Zedong Era Ballet... to test the hypothesis of social constructionists, the applicability of 'lived experience' and the case of embodiment" (184). Of course hypothesis testing is the *sine qua non* of Western social science, but as Zheng does not seriously return to this "hypothesis" anyway we may leave it aside as rhetorical.

Following a brief excursion into the history of the introduction of ballet into China, Zheng proceeds to analyze photographs taken from *Red Girl's Regiment*—albeit that her obvious debt to semiotics remains unacknowledged and possibly unconscious (Barthes 1972). Photographs (figs. 10.1 & 10.2) include a double-take comparing 1970 and 1972 shots of "Qionghua chained and beaten" read through the jargon of "habitus" and "hexis" where "Quionghua's hexis can be seen from her fiery gaze, and the unyielding posture in which she hold up her body despite being handcuffed. This is the hexis of the laboring people personified by the sufferings of women.... Her beaten corpse [*sic*] embodied women's oppression..." (191). Zheng, aside from mistaking a live chained ballerina for a corpse, goes on to boast that "enormous" differences between the 1970 and 1972 shots (which are subtly different) exist, leading to her conclusion regarding the mysterious impossibility of mechanical reproduction in the power of danced performance: here the initial revolutionary zeal seems to have rather quickly washed out. For Zheng the raised clenched fists in the other pictures (figs. 10.3 & 10.6) "seem to tell the entire story" of "sinicized.... militant feminism" (199), but there are other stories here too, of course, including the leak of Chinese martial arts into ballet and the blending of ballet with martial arts in Mao's China. Unfortunately Zheng's voice seems to have become drowned under the sheer weight of the theory espoused and the incorporated ideas of Bourdieu (read through Jenkins), Mauss, Turner and many others.

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