

Twenty-five centuries of body and face in China

Wu Hung and Katherine R. Tsiang, eds. 2005. *Body and Face in Chinese Visual Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 448 pages, ISBN 0 674 01657 2

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Books on Chinese visual culture generally examine one specific time period or archaeological excavation, or they take the form of an exhibition catalogue. *Body and Face in Chinese Visual Culture*, however, approaches its subject thematically. Its analysis of perceptions of body and face – examined in 12 different ways by as many specialists in the field of visual culture – spans Chinese history from the 5th century CE to the present. Case studies based on archaeological, visual and textual evidence inter-woven with anecdotal stories lure the reader from one era to the next. The variation in era and approach make for an informative volume containing remarkable insights into the reality of flesh and bone in Chinese cultural history.

The editors emphasise the importance of ‘...not simply adopting Western preconceptions and discourse in analysing Chinese representations of body and face’. While the ‘body and face’ in western visual history is seen as developing towards the representation of individuality, this book shows that Chinese perception disconnects body and face from a person’s individual features, instead representing the symbolic function of the person.

Origins of a visual culture

The quest for the significance of body and face begins in part one, ‘The Religious Body’, and its opening chapter, ‘On Tomb Figurines, The Beginning of a Visual Tradition’, by Wu Hung. Archaeological evidence from the early period of Chinese civilisation allows Wu to give an overview of sculptures depicting or representing the human body, covering the six centuries between the Zhou period and the Han period with its dynastic tombs of nobles. In the 6th century BCE, Confucius cited tomb figurines as a recent development and denounced their lifelike form that implied human sacrifice. Wu, however, argues using recent archaeological evidence that the figurines were substitutes: their ‘emergence... is associated with a decline in human sacrifices’ (p.15).

Wu argues that changes in religious and cultural life are reflected in the various figurine materials and sizes. He assigns material symbolism a role in the fabrication of the sculptures when he argues that ‘the use of these materials was not based on individual choice but determined by cultural conventions’ (p.29). He links the Chu region in the south with wood and the northern region with pottery, but I can’t help but wonder whether the choice of material depended more on the natural environment and availability of these materials.

Wu’s case study of the First Emperor takes us among the great variety of artefacts found around the tumulus of Qin Shihuang. The world famous terra cotta soldiers are described in detail, including individual faces and hairstyles (pp.45-47). But Wu leaves the reader

with the image of thousands of soldiers standing in line as grey terra cotta figurines (p.40), when in fact these larger than life-sized sculptures of ancient warriors were originally painted in life-like colour, which would have rendered a totally different appearance. Wu also leaves the figurines’ religious nature open to question.

Religion

Religion plays a more prominent role in the following two chapters: Katherine R. Tsiang addresses visual aspects of Buddhist texts, and Eugene Y. Wang focuses on the Famen Relics of Tang court life. These images are undoubtedly religious in nature and show the depiction of the Buddha as gradually shifting from representing his ‘True Body’ to a Buddha represented in scenes from his life depicted on statues in the late 6th century CE. Wang argues, ‘By identifying with the True Body of the Buddha, who is in fact bodiless, mortal beings can imagine a similar state of being for themselves’ (p.81). This must have been a very appealing concept to Tang rulers in their search for immortality.

The book’s second part, ‘Body Imagery and Self-representation’, is concerned with a more human aspect of the body and face. Kathleen M. Ryor presents the case of Xu Wei (1521-93), a painter specialising in the depiction of flowers and plants, whose physical and spiritual discomforts taint his renditions of his subjects’ beauty. Ryor cites Xu’s poems as evidence of his illness and argues that the painter’s mind and heart are directly connected to the movements of the hand that express his state of being directly on paper.

Qianshen Bai confronts us with ‘Illness, Disability, and Deformity in Seventeenth Century Chinese Art’, and blames the



Archer with a green face, tomb of Qin Shihuang, Qinling mausoleum, Qin Dynasty 221- 206 BCE, painted terra-cotta, 152 x 60 x 40 cm.

(c) Museum of the Terracotta Warriors and Horses of Qin Shihuangdi



Three male figurines, tomb of Emperor Jingdi, Yangling mausoleum, Han Dynasty 206 BCE – 220 CE, terra-cotta, 62 x 10 x 10 cm. (c) The Shaanxi Archaeological Institute

Ming-Qing transition for the sense of loss and helplessness in the reports by poets and calligraphers of their physical ailments. Physical problems have played a role in artists’ work before, but in the 17th century they were exploited as metaphors for moral and emotional issues. By the end of the Ming period explicit claim of physical deformities in calligraphy can be interpreted as alienation from the foreign Manchu power. From that point onwards, this concept of illness as metaphor is a recurring theme in Chinese visual culture.

Individual face versus representation

In part three, ‘Body-Face Interactions in Portraiture’, Jan Stuart considers portraiture in ‘The Face in Life and Death, Mimesis and Chinese Ancestor Portraits’. Taking us back to the Ming and Qing period, Stuart outlines what distinguishes Chinese portraits from the western standard for portraiture. The western painter is concerned with the exact likeness of a person at a given moment in time. ‘Unlike other categories of Chinese portraiture’, Stuart writes, ‘ancestor likeness did not seek to convey a person’s inner spirit; rather they aimed only at transcribing the heaven endowed physiognomy of the sitter’s face’ (p.201). It is not the specifics of a person, but the position of the person that defines the image. The importance of the painted ancestor

is limited by custom: ‘When rolled up, the portrait was no more “alive” than a landscape painting, but ritual performances before a likeness attracted the spirit and empowered the painting to receive offerings and in turn reciprocate by blessing the family’ (p.205). Stuart concludes that these ancestor portraits are created as ritual objects and disproves the notion that they all look alike.

Roberta Wu reveals the illuminating story of a Chinese photographer able to produce portraits of his customers without using a camera. He possessed a large set of negatives from which he carefully selected the most fitting likeness. Printing the one he thought was most appropriate for the occasion, he presented the photograph to the customer as a true image. Here again, the individual features of the person seem less important than the purpose of the image, and Wu

centres her argument around the difference between western and Chinese principles of image likeness.

The performing arts

In the fourth and final part, ‘Performing the Body and Face’, ‘The Piping of Man’ by Susan E. Nelson shows examples of people depicted in a painting as if they are listening to the wind. According to the Daoist text *Zhuangzi*, the flow of ‘qi’, the cosmic breath, can be recognised in its powerful manifestation through sound. The lonely figure of a man with protruding lips whistling to the sky is in fact practising communication with the spiritual world.

In the final chapter Zhang Zhen discusses ‘Song at Midnight’, a horror film released in Shanghai in 1937, which tells a story of love and loss partly based on *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925). While the Chinese perception of sound described in ‘The Piping of Man’ depicts man in balance with nature, Zhang describes the opposite: haunting sound effects create a sphere of horror and violence. In early Chinese film, body and sound are physically separated, because the female actor’s voice is in fact the synchronised voice of a male opera singer playing a female part. Zhang convincingly argues the influence of German expressionist cinema, while in his view ‘...the visual style and the acoustic composition of “Song at Midnight”...are far from a simple mimicry of Hollywood’ (p.359).

In China, earthly representation is often connected to the supernatural, but in this book we see the physical traces of past generations in a down-to-earth way. The book’s contrast between Chinese perception and western perception guides the reader and presents a refreshing, coherent perspective of Chinese visual culture. The volume surpasses what the individual papers can achieve on their own, and the chapters I have not mentioned are full of interesting arguments on the theme of body and face. As a whole, the book makes good reading for anyone interested in Asian visual culture. It will also serve ‘western’ art history as an example of the current development towards a more global history of art. ◀

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Replica of the painted soldiers are shown at :

Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland GmbH
Museumsmeile Bonn, Friedrich-Ebert-Allee 4
53113 Bonn, Germany

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Burial Goods and Temple Treasures from China’s Ancient Capital
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