

Culture, Embodiment, and the Senses

Thursday, 22 September 2005

Reading

Shigehisa Kuriyama, *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine*, chapter 6, pp. 233-272

(Note: Italicized questions set aside by arrow-bullets are broad questions to keep in mind and think about throughout the reading and analysis)

There was a relationship between the Chinese dynasties at a given time and the conception of medicine during that time.

- *What is the view of the self? How has it changed?*

Kuriyama systematically traces these through the history...

Wind

Imagination of winds in history has been overlooked although it is a crucial feature of the senses in embodiment.

Greek: North vs. South winds and the positive/negative qualities attached to them

Chinese: multiplicity of the winds, empty vs. full

Greek conceptions of superior **race** based could potentially have been based on winds, as the Northern winds were more esteemed, the Southern winds.

Greek: winds carry change but may or may not influence the individual

Chinese: winds were invasive agents to be feared

The Shang winds were thought to cause sickness, but it was also thought that ancestral curses may cause sickness. Here we can explore **concepts of the person** – the sense that the individual was able to be affected by ancestors testifies to an **extended sense of self**. One was not an autonomous individual but could be *affected across time and space* by an entity that one was attached to through kinship.

Greek *pneuma* – inner breath, vital force – eventually lead to the notion of the soul

- *What is at stake if the individual can be influenced by **external forces** (e.g. spirits, winds)? Are we then at their mercy?*

Chinese: individual was vulnerable to outside forces

Greek: focus was instead on anatomy

The Greek emphasis on **muscularity** illustrates the idea that an individual can change the self through **will/action**, and therefore was less vulnerable. This shift in the notion of **personhood** was a result of the scientific study of the body.

North wind = positive, south wind = negative. Ideas about the positivity/negativity of regions were mapped onto people's characters. Montesquieu made observations of culture in the late 17th century and argued that national character was related to environment – that specific regions had distinctive environmental features that influenced what the people were like. **Environment shapes character.**

Note the time orientation in the concept of *bafeng sishi*, the 8 winds and 4 seasons. Bad winds were supposed to signify time gone awry. This illustrates the idea of how the cosmos and the environment are related to the conception of day-to-day events.

Concepts of the body shift – dialogue/discourse emerges from practice and personal experiences of practitioners and clinicians.

It was a question of **governance** when it came to organs. The Greeks focused on *particular organs*, while the Chinese concentrated more on overall *form*.

- *How is the conception of the body useful and manipulated by those in power – scientists and politicians both?*

The Chinese state codified proper relations in society, e.g. filial piety – what behavior was expected along with the spirit behind it.

Embodiment is always politicized!

There's a disconnect in the Western attempt at legitimizing Eastern practices, in its scientific study of alternative methods. We're using a Western understanding and framework for a conceptually different Eastern ideas and methods.

Some questions to consider:

- *How do we recognize the body in particular ways?*
- *How does language predispose understanding?*
- *How do we cross our world view? How do we transcend cultural boundaries, social relations, ethos of the self?*
- *Has the body become mechanized?*