

Dao Embodied - Embodying Dao: The Body as Locus of Personal Cultivation in Ancient Daoist and Confucian Philosophy

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Abstract : This paper compares ancient Daoist and Confucian approaches to the human body as a locus for learning, edification or personal cultivation. While pointing out some major differences between ancient Chinese and mainstream Western visions of the body, it seeks at the same time inspiration in some seminal Western phenomenological and post-structuralist writings, in particular from Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Pierre Bourdieu. By clarifying the somewhat dissimilar scopes of foci found in Daoist and Confucian philosophies with regard to the role of and attitude to the body, the conclusion is nevertheless that their approaches are comparable, and that both traditions take the physical body to play a vital role in the cultivation of excellence. Lastly, it will be argued that cosmological underpinnings prevent the Confucian li from being rigid and invariable and that it rather emerges as a flexible learning device to train through active embodiment a refined sensibility for one's cultural environment.

Keywords : body, Confucianism, Daoism, li (ritual), phenomenology

Conference Title : ICCS 2019 : International Conference on Chinese Studies

Conference Location : Buenos Aires, Argentina

Conference Dates : February 27-28, 2019