

The Body in Culture

Instructor: Prof. CHEUNG Shoan Yin (she/her/hers)

Email: sy.cheung@cuhk.edu.hk

Course Hours: Wednesday 2:30 p.m. - 5:15 p.m. CKB 123

Bodies are multiple: they are icons, metaphors, texts, commodities, raw materials, and more.

This course uses a cross-disciplinary approach that views culture as a dynamic medium that shapes, molds, and disciplines bodies into their many forms. We will learn how bodies change in relation to the methods that measure, regulate, and classify them, and how their production, regulation, and representation is central to the operations of power. This requires an expansive understanding of culture, and our topics will include an investigation of how bodies are made in relation to cultures of health, science, and global capitalism as well. By doing so, we will understand how the cultivation of physical bodies links individuals to broader social and political processes. We will also investigate how normative discourses on the body are created and circulated, and how they intertwine with race, gender, class, ethnicity, nation, and other markers of social difference. The first half of the class surveys a variety of social theories that explore how bodies are made through culture. The second half of the class investigates the relationship between body vitality and governance. As a final project, students will create a lesson plan with the goal of teaching high school students about the intersections between the body and power.

Course Objectives

By completing this course, you will develop the ability to:

- Gain foundational skills in reading and analyzing academic texts
- Explain multiple theories about how bodies are constituted culturally
- Analyze the role of institutions in shaping and disciplining bodies and bodily practices, and reflect on how your own body is implicated in these processes as well
- Identify how and why normative ideas of bodies circulate in various cultural contexts
- Gain in-depth insight into one aspect of this topic through a final project

Course Requirements

Short Posts (2 x 500 words)

Writing is a way for you to think, reflect, and synthesize your learning. Through two short posts, you will have an opportunity to play with the theoretical content of the course in a more informal, low-stakes way. These posts will also complement the occasional in-class writing exercise to help

you build foundational analytic skills that will be key to your success in graduate school. More detailed instructions about these short posts will be distributed later.

Fieldnote (750 words)

In this assignment, you will investigate a body in its social environment by going out into the city to do fieldwork. You will learn how to do ethnography, a research method in Cultural Studies that uses empirical methods to reveal the social processes that shape our everyday realities. This fieldwork will teach you to be an astute observer of social phenomenon, and you will learn how to account your own subjectivity in the process of collecting and creating new knowledge. More detailed information about this assignment will be distributed later.

Final Project

The final project is a 20-minute group presentation on a topic that demonstrates the relationships between bodies and power, broadly defined. You will do this by identifying a theme from the readings and using it to analyze your topic. Possible topics can include issues of sex, gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, social class and inequality, and many others. You will be evaluated on how well you connect the theoretical material to concrete examples from your social world. In addition to the intellectual content, you will also be evaluated on your presentation skills. This includes how well your group communicates the key points of your analysis and how well your group handles 10 minutes of Q&A following the presentation.

Assessment

Your grade will be assessed according to your engagement with the class materials, as evidenced in both your written work and class participation. You will be evaluated on your ability to express your ideas and analysis in a cogent and well-structured manner, and creatively explore the theories and methodologies introduced in this course.

Generally, performance that exceeds or falls short of expectations within a grade category will receive a modification of + / - to the overall letter grade.

Participation	20%
Short Posts (2)	20%
Fieldnote	20%
Final Project	40%

- A** Outstanding performance on all learning outcomes
- B** Good performance on all learning outcomes
- C** Satisfactory performance on learning outcomes

- D** Non-satisfactory performance on learning outcomes
F Failure to complete assessment requirements, including plagiarism

Academic Honesty

The Chinese University of Hong Kong places very high importance on honesty in academic work submitted by students and adopts a policy of zero tolerance on cheating and plagiarism. Any related offence will lead to disciplinary action including termination of studies at the University. For a description of CUHK's policy on academic honesty, view the following website: [http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/Eng_htm_files_\(2013-14\)/index_page2.htm](http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/Eng_htm_files_(2013-14)/index_page2.htm)

The Chinese University of Hong Kong community embraces diversity of age, background, beliefs, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, gender expression, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, and other visible and non-visible categories. I welcome all students in this course and expect that all students contribute to a respectful, welcoming and inclusive environment. If you have any concerns about classroom climate, please come to me to share your concern.

Course Schedule

- 1. Sep. 4 Introduction: The Body in Culture**

- 2. Sep. 11 Body, Self, and Society**
 - Mary Douglas, "The Two Bodies," *Natural Symbols* (2003 [1970])
 - Marcel Mauss, "Techniques of the Body," *Beyond the Body Proper* (2007 [1934])
 - Terence Turner, "The Social Skin," in *Beyond the Body Proper* (2007 [1980])

- 3. Sep. 18 Mid-Autumn Festival**

- 4. Sep. 25 Body Practices**

- Loïc Wacquant, “The Pugilistic Point of View: How Boxers Think and Feel About Their Trade,” *Theory and Society* (1995)

Recommended:

- David Swartz, “Habitus: A Cultural Theory of Action” and “Fields of Struggle for Power,” *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (1997)

5. Oct. 2 Sensing the Body

- Kathryn Geurts, “On Rocks, Walks, and Talks in West Africa: Cultural Categories and an Anthropology of the Senses,” *Ethos* (2002)
- Oliver Sacks, “The Disembodied Lady,” *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1985)

Recommended:

- Thomas Csordas, “Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology,” *Ethos* (1990)

6. Oct. 9 Theorizing Difference

- Nicholas Hudson, “The ‘Hottentot Venus,’ Sexuality, and the Changing Aesthetics of Race, 1650-1850,” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* (2008)
- Londa Schiebinger, “Theories of Gender and Race,” *Nature’s Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (2004)

Recommended:

- Ludmilla Jordanova, “Natural Facts: A Historical Perspective on Science and Sexuality,” *Feminist Theory and the Body* (1999 [1980])
- Philippa Levine, “Why Gender and Empire?” *Gender and Empire* (2007)

7. Oct. 16 Body Representations

- Genevieve Clutario, “Pageant Politics: Tensions of Power, Empire, Nationalism in Manila Carnival Queen Contests,” *Gendering the Trans-Pacific World* (2017)

- Nicole Constable, “Sexuality and Discipline Among Filipino Domestic Workers in Hong Kong,” *American Ethnologist* (1997)

Recommended:

- Balogun, Oluwakemi, “Idealized Femininity and Embodied Nationalism in Nigerian Beauty Contests,” *Gender & Society* (2012)

8. Oct. 23 Thick and Thin

- Susan Greenhalgh, “Disordered Eating/Eating Disorder: Hidden Perils of the Nation’s Fight Against Fat,” *Medical Anthropology* (2016)
- Sabrina Strings, “Obese Black Women as ‘Social Dead Weight.’ Reinventing the Diseased Black Woman,” *Signs* (2015)

Recommended:

- Katherine Pike and Amy Borovoy, “The Rise of Eating Disorders in Japan: Issues of Culture and Limitations of the Model of ‘Westernization’,” *Culture, Medicine, & Psychiatry* (2004)
- Susan Bordo, “Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallization of Culture,” *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993)

9. Oct. 30 Disability

- Margaret Stran, “Sitting and Resisting: How Using a Wheelchair Confronts Ideas of Normal,” *Body Battlegrounds* (2019)
- Gregor Wolbring, “The Politics of Ableism,” *Development* (2008)
- Susan Wendell, “The Social Construction of Disability,” *The Rejected Body* (1996)

Recommended:

- Mara Mills and Dan Bouk, “The History of ‘Impairment,’ *Osiris* (2024)

10. Nov. 6 Muscle

- Xinyan Peng, “‘You’ve Got to Have Core Muscles.’ Disciplining Hardworking Bodies,” *Corporate Women in Contemporary China: ‘We’ve Always Worked’* (2022)

- Shigehisa Kuriyama, “Muscularity and Identity,” *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine* (2002)

11. Nov. 13 Body Commodification

- Rene Ameling, “Gender and the Value of Bodily Goods: Commodification in Egg and Sperm Donation,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* (2009)
- Warwick Anderson, “The Third-World Body,” *Medicine in the Twentieth Century* (2000)
- Nancy Scheper-Hughes, “Human Traffic: Exposing the Brutal Organ Trade,” *New Internationalist* (2014)

Recommended:

- Margaret Lock, “The Alienation of Body Tissue and the Biopolitics of Immortalized Cell Lines,” *Body & Society* (2001)

12. Nov. 20 Enhancement

- Jean Baudrillard, “The Finest Consumer Object,” *The Body: A Reader* (2005)
- Alexander Edmonds, “‘The Poor Have a Right to Be Beautiful:’ Cosmetic Surgery in Neoliberal Brazil,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (2007)
- Alvaro Jarrin, “The Politics of Beauty,” *Revista* (2017)

Recommended:

- Aren Aizura, “Where Health and Beauty Meet: Femininity and Racialization in Thai Cosmetic Surgery Clinics,” *Asian Studies Review* (2009)

13. Nov. 27 Final Presentations