Health or beauty

Case studies of Chinese women migrants' searching for a healthy body

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Résumé : « Une femme est toujours de quelque manière sur une scène, exposée au jugement masculin. Elle ne cesse de se dédoubler dans le miroir pour anticiper le regard et les appréciations des hommes lors de ses déplacements ou son travail. » (P6, Le Breton, 2010). This statement points out a universal truth in the current world, either in western societies or in eastern societies. Women are constantly judged by men's gaze - real and imagined, which may also be interiorised in their own criteria of a good image. Women's bodies, seemingly to be their own, but indeed are controlled directly by political policies, such as the former One-child policy, and the nowadays Three-child policy in China.

Chinese women migrants in France, are exposed to two sets of masculine judgement - Chinese and French, east and west. The most popular so-call men's standard for women's beauty is "white, slim, young" (bai, shou, you) in China, which the "white" is opposite to the "bronzé" standard in France.

Does living in France change the way they look at their own body ? What do they do to live up to the expectation of their own image ? This paper attempts to answer the above questions following several cas studies with an anthropological approach. In describing and analysing Chinese women migrants' experiences, such as on sport practice - home yoga, gym, cycling, etc., their skin-care practices, and their discourse on youth, this paper discusses these women's motivation of these practices, the perception of their body, and the perception of beauty.

One plausible conclusion is that under the name of "practice sport in order to be healthy", the ultimate motivation behind all the sports activities is to be slim - a world-wide obsession, particularly in Asian as mentioned by Le Breton (2015), especially among the new mothers in my fieldwork. Even yoga, a supposed spiritual practice, for some woman becomes a competition with herself to get succeeded in achieving doing difficult positions and losing weight. The general conclusion is that in another country like France, these Chinese women still stick to the "white, slim, young" socially constructed criteria. For them, slim equals to beauty.

Mots-clés : Chinese women migrants ; health ; beauty

Tout le monde tient le beau pour le beau,
C'est en cela que réside sa laideur.
Tout le monde tient le bien pour le bien,
C'est en cela que réside son mal.
——Lao-tseu « Tao-tö king » [1]

1 Introduction

"Huan fei yuan shou", a Chinese idiom, if applied to free translation, refers to "beautiful women, each of whom is attractive in her own way" ("huan fei yan shou", n.d.), while literally means the favorite concubine "Huan"[2] of emperor Xuanzong in the Tang dynasty is plump while the queen "Yan"[3] of emperor Chengdi in Han dynasty is slim, both women have great reputation for their usual beauty attracting the particular attention and thus the « love » of their emperors.

It is obvious that the size of women's bodies, slim or plump, has long and always been a condition to their beauty, at least in China. The most beautiful women are often the concubines of the emperors, selected to accompany them as they met the many criteria, including their stunning appearance according to most people and more importantly, according to the most powerful man at the time – the emperor, also called "tian zi", literally meaning the son of the heaven.

There is no longer so-called "tian zi", nor the selection of beauty for the "tian zi" in modern China. The male gaze on women's bodies, however, persists and is prevalent. The three criteria "bai, shou, you" —white (skin), slim, young— are the nowadays the popular saying for selecting an ideal girl-friend in China. Paradoxically, the similar saying about selecting an ideal boy-friend is "gao, fu, shuai'— tall, rich, and handsome. Through these seemingly joking on-line popular expressions, it can be seen that the all three criteria for women are based on their appearance and youth, while for men being rich is more important than young, tall is more important than slim.

Although in the year of 2022, a slim female body, rather than a plump body, is still considered to be beautiful as it was in the Han dynasty 2000 years ago in China, as indicating in the white, slim, young standards, this time under the rapid economic change in China after the reform and opening-up policy in the 1970s and 1990s and as some researchers indicate under the influences from the West (Le Breton, 2010) and Korean popular culture (Jung, 2018).

[1] Tian xia jie zhi mei zhi wei mei, si e yi ; jie zhi shan zhi wei shan, si bu shan yi.
(天下皆知美之为美，斯恶已：皆知善之为善，斯不善已。)

[2] Huan, refers to YANG Yuhuan, or Yang Guifei, subject of many outstanding Chinese poems and dramas, and the Emperor Xuan Zongs (reigned 712–756) favourite concubine in the Tang dynasty (Yang Guifei, n.d.). The idiom is originated from one poem of SU Shi, also known as SU Dongpo (1037-1101), Chinese scholar-official, famous poet, essayist, calligrapher and painter in the Song dynasty (Su Shi, n.d.).

[3] Yan, refers to ZHAO Feiyan, a dancer and later became queen of the emperor Han Chengdi (reigned 33–7 BCE), known as she can dance on the palms and as lightly as a swallow (Tseng *et al.*, 2015) – her name Feiyan literally means a flying swallow in Chinese.

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2 Methodology

This article studies the relation between the standard of slimness and the Chinese women's regular practices on taking care of their body in daily life in France, including keep-fit sports, yoga practice and food. The following questions are raised : Why they practice sports — to be healthy, to be slim, or else ? How do their migration context influence take care of their body ? This paper attempts to answer the above questions through two case studies, analysed from an intersectional approach in three perspectives : the individual body-self, the social body, and the body politic (Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, informal discussions and participant observation in the fieldwork related to a current anthropological doctoral thesis study in Bordeaux and Paris.

3 Recent context on slimness and fitness-keeping for women in China

The trend of slim equals to beauty returned to China with its economic development and opening-up reform policy in the 1990s. The rapid increase of people's living standard changes their perception on weight—from envying people who are plump to considering slim as beautiful : « Quand j'étais jeune, dit une Chinoise qui dirige un centre de fitness à Pékin, les gens admiraient et jalousaient même les personnes grosses parce quelle avait une vie meilleure […] mais maintenant, quand ils en voient une, ils disent : elle est affreuse » (in Bordo, 2003, p. XV, cited in Le Breton, 2010). It was not uncommon to see advertisements on weight-losing products on TV, such as « da yin xiang » weight loss herbal tea, which can still be seen nowadays in some Chinese or Asian shops in France. It is becoming more and more flourishing the markets of weight loss products and gymnastic centres in China.

On the other hand, keep-fit videos from China and other countries are available and popular thanks to the highly developing Internet technology and wide-spreading social medias. In the Chapter Reading the slender body, Bordo traced the change in the meaning of the muscled body from being associated to the insensitive, unintelligent, and animalistic in the 1970s to todays cultural icon and working out is a glamorous and sexualised yuppie activity in the West (1993 :195). "En même temps que le corps de l'homme se sexualise, le corps de la femme muscle (Le Breton, 2011 :237). Though Bordos and Le Breton both refer to the 1990s in the West, the popularity of a muscled body and working out seem to be popular Asian countries, such as China, where the convenience of on-line workout programmes are becoming more and more attractive and appealing in the new millennium. It is worth mentioning that the rhetoric of the slim and successful weight-losing experts has witnessed a change from early 2000 to 2022.

Jung Da-yeon is a fitness Korean teacher, very popular in China especially in the early 2000s for her fitness videos and her personal story of weight-loss motivated by the words of her husband. Jung quit her job, became a housewife and a mother of two children. Her body changed, her weight increasing to 70 kilograms after giving birth to two children. The famous story—more visible among Chinese titles than English reports in search results of Google—is that she heard her husband murmuring in his dream that he missed her former (slim) body one night (Jung Da-yeon, 2011). With

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the fear of her husband might fall in love with a third party, she was motivated and determined to lose weight, thus succeeding in losing 20 kilograms within only three months with a routine workout and diet (« Get to know », 2019). This story and her fitness video thus brought out a trend to follow her on-line videos exercises at home, among many housewives and university girl students in China.

The trend of Jung Da-yeon seemed to fade away as time goes by, but the trend of losing weight and keeping fit continues even in the pandemic-stricken and lockdown period in 2022 China. Liu Genghong, singer, actor and fitness coach settled down in Shanghai, has created an unprecedented keep-fit trend during the recent lockdown of the city. Together with his wife Vivi Wang and sometimes with his children or even his mother-in-law, he streamed exercise videos in their living room five days per week *via* the application Douyin—Chinese version of Tiktok (Koetse, 2022). They attracted more than 64 million followers within a single month—compared with the fitness application Keep which accumulates 34 million monthly active users in seven years (Li, 2022). This phenomenon is undoubtedly linked to the strict lockdown situation. The atmosphere and interaction of the couple energetically doing work out together in family—combined with Vivi Wang's comical facial expressions during the workouts — is another main reason, however, that attracts viewers, visible in the comments during in streaming. The rhetoric of doing exercises is no longer losing weight for one's husband and "shape your body" as Jung Da-yeon's, but to « burn fats », « sweat a lot » and encourage family members, including senior members to move and exercise. A hashtag « Liu Genghong girls » has been created, meaning girls following his exercise streaming. The personal story of Liu Genghong's muscled body : he was mocked by a girl that his body was too weak as a boy when he was younger. He then decided to go to gymnastic centre and trained himself a muscled body. He took pleasure in training, with great success, and then later became a coach himself— an example of a successful "body builder" who "prend son corps en main et ce faisant il reprend le contrôle de son existence (Le Breton, 2015 :43).

Furthermore, Le Breton mentioned "le corps de femmes « parfaites » sexpose partout sur les murs des villes, les spots publicitaires, les magazines, les publicités des magasins ; impossible de ne pas les voir et de ne pas se comparer dans le regret de ne pas leur ressembler davantage" (2010), while the Chinese "perfect" women are in general still slimmer than Western stars. Some actresses and models actively participated in social media activities such as the so-called A4 challenge, which refers to demonstrate one's waist can be completely hidden by the width of a standard A4 sheet. Some studies also showed that the impact of ideal slimness image in Chinese media has been even more pronounced based upon self-report data (Jackson et *al.*, 2016 ; Luo et *al.*, 2020).

4 Case studies

The following two case studies are chosen and presented because of their differences in social-economic status, marital status, social life in France, different language competency and academic background, and choices of staying or leaving France, among

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other things, despite of the same and only category which they were put into in France —Chinese women migrants or Chinese students.

4.1 Ms. Hong

Presentation of Ms. Hong

Ms. Hong — her real name is anonymized — in her early thirties, has returned to China with a MA degree just before the outbreak of COVID-19 in Europe, ending her more than eight years' student life in France.

She lived alone in France, focused on her study as she came to France after her high school education in China—she had to get a university diploma before leaving France, as it is an important criterion for the more and more intense competition in the Chinese job market. She socialised little, more likely to spend her leisure time in watching Chinese or Korean TV series and videos. If she did socialise, it was basically with Chinese students — "it is already difficult to listen and speak French in class, I don't want to speak French in normal times. And I have nothing to talk with them (French classmates)"— plus one or two French girl classmates only during her last year's study because of their common interest in Korean pop culture.

As a foreign student living alone, Ms. Hong made efforts to take care of her body in order to avoid being sick : "I dare not to be sick in France. It is too troublesome to see a doctor here. And the doctors, they will only give you pain-killer like Doliprane and ask you to drink Coca-cola." She tried the Jung Da-yeon exercises alone in her apartment in her early days, but later she regularly went out to take a walk, doing exercise outdoors, sometimes jogging, even daily when it was sunny. It is also important for her to eat health foods like fruits and vegetables. She has an overweight problem, however, that results from over-eating in her opinion, though she was already overweight since her childhood. Eating is at the same time to take care of her body, but can also be a problem to her—she needs to control her desire of eating junk food, or eating too much.

As for her overweight body, she claimed that she never thought herself has a problem of weight — "I even came across people in the street saying that 'you are beautiful'when I wore a skirt." Her doing physical exercises, jogging, thus, is "not for losing weight, but to shape the body and look having a lighter weight." Still, she paid attention to her weight change. Her weight often decreased when she was in France and increased when returned to China during the summer holiday. It was according to her because of her mother's food, the variety of Chinese food and snacks, and the lack of motivation to do exercises in the hotter summer in her hometown.

Nowadays, Ms. Hong again lives alone, but this time working in a big city far away from her parents and friends of her hometown. Her daily life is busy and tiring, centring on her work. She neither goes out for a walk or doing exercises as in France, nor does cooking as on-line delivery food service is very convenient—this recent online-to-offline (O2O) food delivery industry develops rapidly and in big cities China with great transformation and improvements from 2017-2019 (Zhao et *al.*, 2021).

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With this new life transition from student to employee, from France where she lived since her twentieth to her own country China at her early thirties under a lot of interpersonal pressure, Ms. Hong once day felt "like I do not exist, one day, faced to the wall in my apartment, like I am disappearing", that was when she realised some signs of eating disorder symptoms : she ate a lot while not at all hungry, feeling nothing.

Discussion

The case of Ms. Hong can be analysed from the three perspectives of the individual body-self, social body and body politic (Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987).

The individual body-self of Ms. Hong is more seen in her life in France, where she did actually take care of her body by physical exercises and paying attention to nutrition balance. From an intersectional point of view, her identity is in this country : foreigner with limited language competency (about B2) in French teaching classes in social science, alone with family or close friends, it seems that her social self-marginal or even invisible — thus is much more less than her individual body-self. She had to look after herself, especially her body, so as not to be sick, because her dare not to be sick– sickness when alone in a foreign country means suffering without help or caring from family – with the mistrust about the biomedicine and healthcare system in France. Her perceived body-self is more beautiful in the foreign country, where she believes people do not care about weight because she received compliments from strangers — people in China seem to be more influenced by the idea of being slim. Thus, she kept practicing sports, such as jogging, in order to primarily "shape the body", to "look less fat", though she would be happy to lose some weight. While less complied with the slim standard, Ms. Hong does love to have a lighter skin tone, using sun-proof and cosmetic products to achieve the effect. This aspect of "white" will not be further discussed due to the limited space in the current article.

As a foreigner with little interaction with local people, combined with little interest in French politics and media partly resulted from linguistic barriers, Ms. Hong was less bound or sensitive to the politics on women in France, but more influenced by the situation in China when talking to her family and friends or when reading Chinese news articles — such as the three-child policy — but the influence was not very strong as she was far away from her family, living in another cultural and political context.

These three perspectives became totally different once Ms. Hong finished her studies in France and returned to China to work. The "social setting" in the sense of Goffman (1956) has changed from a western European setting to a Chinese setting. Ms. Hong went back to China, her native country, while looking for a job in a big city far away from her home town with different local dialect and another local culture. The values in professional setting and job markets are constantly changing in China, owing to the rapid political, social and economic development including the expansion of higher education institutions and more university graduates enter into the job market each year. Ms. Hong thus has to adjust and relearn local professional culture, while unlearn the social skills acquired in the French academic environment, which may be already different from the professional world in France, and thus still less conducive

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to the professional world in China. Ms. Hong was, therefore, confronted with a new environment and a new social identity at the same time when her peers in China have mostly settled down with their own new families and / or stable jobs.

Ms. Hongs ways of taking care of the body disappeared, or even changed into self-sabotaged eating behaviour once returned to China. With the little free time after work and during the weekend, she seldom went out and socialised, as in France. The difference is the objective in France is to obtain a degree, and the relationship with classmates are simpler. As a foreign student, she perceived that people are nice to her in the university. Whereas in China, the relationship with her superiors and colleagues are more complicated without visible scores to validate her performances. She is preoccupied by her work and work performance. Since then, it seems that Ms. Hong's individual body-self shrank and absorbed by the social body once she entered the professional Chinese world. The cooking part, which she enjoyed and one way to care her body, is taken over by the highly developed online-to-offline delivery system or take-out food in restaurants. The body politic becomes more important, too. In China, social pressure for women in their thirties to get married is intense due to multifold reasons : Chinese policy on child-birth changing from the once only-child policy to the actual permission to three-child policy, intending to increase birth rate (Xinhua, 2021) ; the traditional Confucian-value-driven Chinese parents considered marriage a "must" to continue family lineage, in addition to the increasing social pressure for the so-called "left-over women"("Sheng nu" in Chinese) — single, unmarried Chinese professional women — to get married (To, 2013, 2015). In her late thirties, her previous psychological support, her parents, turns into a source of stress as many Chinese parents, worrying their daughters too old to be married. With the social body taking up most of her time, parents worrying about her biological age too old to marry. Ms. Hong's individual body only appears when she is alone in her apartment, feeling like she does not exist. Her abnormal eating behaviours can thus be interpreted as a way to prove and to increase the existence of her individual body-self, to the contrary of the care-taking behaviour in France when her individual body-self was much more important and visible.

It is unknowable how Ms. would treat her body without the experience of staying her young adulthood years in a western country — with more strict methods to control her weight or use her body as a rebel to the current trend of "slim equals beauty". What can be seen from this case is that her study and living experiences in France which rendered her social position almost invisible and forced her to be independent in daily life, helped her in some way to appreciate her body which does not comply with the popular trend – a social norm for many women – of beauty in the Chinese society, while still sticking to the slim criteria as to "look lighter" than her weight.

4.2 Ms. Qiu

Presentation of Ms. Qiu

Ms. Qiu—her real name also anonymised, in her mid-thirties, came to France more than eight years ago in her early twenties to pursue her studies : first a master degree and then a doctoral degree. She is married to a Chinese with the same background,

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both settle down in France at the moment. She has been stayed at home as a housewife since the birth of her child three year ago, at the same time when she finished her studies.

With the outbreak and on-going COVID-19 pandemic, she found it difficult to find a job in a country where she can speak the language only at a basic level. More importantly, she has "nothing to discuss with French people". According to Ms. Qiu, she used to work with French people in an internship for her master studies, but she was not very talkative with her French colleagues, preferring to be alone. Her study programmes were all in English. She can also communicate with people for daily life needs in French. But she joked that she neither speak well English nor French. She mostly socialises with Chinese mothers and her husbands' colleagues and friends. Ms. Qiu takes care of her child at home every day, who is very dependent on her, while her husband goes to work in the morning and return home in the evening. Her child did not go to nursery school until last September. Nowadays her child goes to the nursery school only one or two days per week due to limited places in the school. Another reason is that her child, raised up in a pure Chinese environment, could not speak French and usually cried a lot in the nursery school. As the teachers could not understand or communicate with the child, they often ended up by calling Ms. Qiu to take her child back home.

As a stay-at-home mother, Ms. Qiu's daily routine is centred on her child and their home : playing with her child, cleaning the apartment every day, cooking, taking a nap with her child — otherwise the child would not sleep, walking or playing outside with her child, cooking, playing and then going to bed with her child in the evening. She stated that she could nothing for herself when her child was up. Her child, a three-year-old daughter, was very demanding and dependant. Ms. Qiu's only time alone is early in the morning before her daughter wakes up. During this time, she practices sports or yoga regularly, or daily if not interrupted by her child. Though a very devoted mother, she did not, according to her, want to have a child at the first place. But "one person has to compromise when they are in couple", and "it is not possible for a traditional Chinese man (like her husband) to not want a child". So she compromised and became a mother.

Ms. Qiu started doing sports and practicing yoga at home with the intention of losing weight after her giving birth to her child. The more she practised, the more she discovered and took interests in learning knowledge on the anatomy of human body, such as muscles and skeletal system. She practices yoga as a kind of sport, ignoring the aspect of meditation and mindfulness, with the intention of "experiencing the joy of doing sport and controlling the body" rather than her initial intention of losing weight. She works hard to achieve challenging positions in yoga, taking pleasure of it. When I asked how she achieve these positions at home without the guidance of a coach, she replied with a firm tone and a pitch higher than usual : "It is only practice ! Practice ! Practice ! Practice every day !" The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic also motivated Ms. Qiu to do sport so as to improve her immune system. She got vaccinated in order to be able to go out normally during the Pass Sanitare period in France. But with the spread of Omicron variant and her child being in nursery school,

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she did not believe that the vaccine could not reduce the possibility of getting the virus. “It is better to depend on our immune system”.

Ms. Qiu loves cooking and is somewhat proud of it. She also takes pleasure in eating like a lot of Chinese people (Lim & Dam, 2020). Unlike some Chinese people using food to take care of their body that I encountered in the field — such as food therapy of traditional Chinese medicine (Wu & Liang, 2018), she controls her food-taking by calculating calories if she feels having been “taking in too much calories”.

Discussion

The analysis of Ms. Qiu’s case will also be based on the three perspectives of the individual body-self, social body and body politic by Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987).

Unlike Ms. Hong in the previous case, Ms. Qiu did not change her living country once finished her studies. She continues to live in France with her husband. Her professional status, however, has changed from a PhD candidate into a full-time mother. As a PhD candidate with full funding, her social and economic status was above average foreign students. Furthermore, Ms. Qiu mentioned that she had internship experience for her master degree in France and she also worked at the laboratory with French colleague for her doctoral thesis. Both as Chinese student in France, Ms. Qiu tended to be less invisible and less alone in her professional and social life.

Her social body seemed to be faded away when she decided to take care of her child at home after her studies, then the birth of her child, coincided with the outbreak of COVID-19 not long after. This choice is partially due to her “compromise” to have a child, which is influenced by the body politic —the female body as reproductive body and women as primary care-giver. In Ms. Qiu’s case, there is no reason to not have a child if both her and her husband are healthy. Child-bearing becomes a necessity or even a must rather than a woman’s or Ms.Qiu’s choice, though it is her that gives birth to and primarily takes care of the child.

Her individual body-self is at the same time more significant and less significant afterwards. It is more significant, as she stops taking part in the professional world, thus less engaging in the social organisations. It is less significant, because of her duty as a mother, a care-giver with a dependant three-year-old child. Her only time to herself, early in the morning, is used to practice sports or yoga, first for the objective to lose weight, later to control her body.

Yoga is name for diverse practices, including asana-based yoga, meditation-based yoga, and breathing-based yoga, among which the asana-based yoga — comprised of various postures — is what yoga traditionally refers to in Western culture (Desai et *al.*, 2015). The aim of this integration of mind, body and spirit yoga practice is to achieve full-body relaxation, to cultivate a state of equilibrium, harmony, and a sense of awareness (Feuerstein 2011, cited in Dagar & Pandey 2021). It is about relaxation and equilibrium of mind, body and spirit. In Ms. Qiu’s practice, she considers it as a kind of “sport” to train and control human muscles—control is to the opposite of harmony and equilibrium in the practice of yoga. I hypothesised that Ms. Hong

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practices sport and yoga to lose weight to be slim, which she admitted it was her initial intention. But she later took pleasure in train and control her body and muscle.

In the narrative of Ms. Qiu, "control" is a repetitive word, including "muscle control", "the capacity to control my body", to "control calories", "I could not control eating …". All this control of her body — get up very early to practice yoga for one hour or more — and the calories that she takes into her body seems to be her control of the individual body-self, to keep it significant and to control its image, confronting with her no control over her social body in a foreign country under the pandemic crisis or the reproductive body compromised to comply with Chinese social norms and traditional family value in a Chinese couple.

5 Conclusion

Social meaning is stamped into bodily processes and experiences (Kleinman, 1988). The female body is associated with the left side, which symbolises the impure and profane, compared with the male body is associated with the right side, related to pure and sacred in many non-Western societies (Hertz, 1909). From the popular expression for ideal girlfriend "white slim young", different from the "tall rich handsome" for ideal boyfriends in China, women's role seems to be reduced to physical appearances. The "slim" criterion does influence the two Chinese women in the case studies, among many others that I encountered in my fieldwork. In both cases, the two women doing sports regularly or daily, they started with the initial purpose to lose weight and shape the body, while the later development of their practices show that the ways to take care of or even to self-sabotage their body are also the way to preserve their individual body-self, when the individual body-self is menaced by the social body or the body politic. Their migration context in France seems to increase their willingness to doing sports, not to get slim, but to be healthy with the mistrust of the healthcare system and the the vaccin's efficiency against new virus variant during the pandemic.

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