

Somaesthetics, Education, and Democracy: Between Pragmatism and Chinese Thought

Richard Shusterman

Florida Atlantic University

The project of somaesthetics—briefly defined as the critical study and meliorative cultivation of the experience and use of one’s body as a site of sensory appreciation and creative self-fashioning—can be understood as fundamentally a philosophy of education.

Somaesthetics argues that the soma—the living, purposive, sentient body—is the medium or tool through which all learning takes place. It follows that if we improve, by cultivating, the capacities of that medium or tool, we can therefore improve our capacities for learning. Moreover, the improved capacity of this medium of life and learning should make life and learning more pleasurable, and pleasure in learning will enhance our capacities to learn.

Somaesthetics emerged from two main philosophical roots. First, it built on pragmatist aesthetics, which highlights the active, sentient body or *soma* as the necessary energetic ground and skilled medium for our capacities of artistic creation and aesthetic appreciation. Second,

somaesthetics drew on the classical idea of philosophy as a meliorative art of living in which the soma again plays a formative role as the medium for all our experience, perception, and action. Hence, the quest for self-knowledge and self-improvement should involve somatic self-cultivation.¹

Although Western philosophy provided my initial insights into these sources of somaesthetics, East Asian thought, and particularly classical Chinese philosophy, soon became a continuing inspiration for my somaesthetic research. As traditional East Asian aesthetics highlights the value of somatic training for perfecting one’s artistry, so Chinese ethical theory insists that self-examination is both crucial for moral progress and is intrinsically somatic in character.

The Confucian *Analects* invokes the idea of examining thrice daily one’s embodied self,² while another Confucian classic, *The Great Learning*, highlights somatic self-cultivation, as the key ethical foundation for harmoniously governing self, family, and society.³ “Their persons [or bodies, *shen*] being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their states were rightly governed. Their states being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy.”⁴

In different ways, Daoism also emphasizes somatic cultivation, or *xiu shen*, which it often interprets in terms of *shou shen* (protecting the body). Zhuangzi, noting that the ancient sages who “clarified the great Way” made sure to “cultivate their persons” urges us: “Diligently cultivate your [own] person instead of paying

¹ For an explanation of these roots of somaesthetics, see Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), ch. 1; and *Thinking through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), “Introduction.”

² *san xing wu shen* (三省吾身). *Analects*, 1:4. My citations and references to the *Analects* are based on the translation of Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr., *The Analects*

of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation (New York: Ballantine, 1998).

³ *xiushe* (修身, cultivation of one’s embodied person, or *shen*)

⁴ James Legge (trans.), *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893), 266.

attention to externals.”⁵ *Shou shen* and *xiu shen* are combined in the following Zhuangzi injunction: “Carefully guard [*shou shen*] your body, and leave other things to prosper themselves. I guard the one so as to dwell in harmony. Thus have I cultivated my person (*xiushen*) for one thousand two hundred years and my physical form has still not decayed.”⁶

The classical Confucian Chinese tradition insists on the body’s crucial role in art and in the ethical, meliorative art of living through self-knowledge and self-cultivation. It moreover also distinctively combines these themes in an extraordinarily productive way by making the practices of art making and art appreciation an integral part of one’s ethical practices of self-examination and self-refinement.

In contrast to the Western Platonic tradition of suspicion regarding the ethical and political value of the arts, the *Analects* of Confucius emphasize the ethical and political value of the arts of music and poetry along with ritual. The Confucian *Xunzi* builds on these insights to provide detailed argument for music’s (and ritual’s) capacities for providing personal refinement as well as social attunement and harmony.⁷

Deweyan Pragmatism and Chinese Thought

Deweyan pragmatism converges with Confucian thought in celebrating art’s educational importance for ethics and politics.

Although Dewey’s *Art as Experience* makes only a few passing references to Chinese aesthetic thought (confined to Chinese painting), he did write the book after his extended stay in China from 1919 to 1921, an experience that had an enormous influence on his thinking. As his daughter Jane confirmed, this experience “was so great as to act as a rebirth of [Dewey’s] intellectual enthusiasms,” and he henceforth held China as “the country nearest his heart after his own.”⁸ Dewey’s appreciation of China was reciprocated warmly by the enthusiastic reception of his

Somaesthetics argues that the soma—the living, purposive, sentient body—is the medium or tool through which all learning takes place.

lectures there, which were widely published and influential in the New Culture movement of that time.⁹ There is, indeed, a great deal of promising overlap between the orientations of Deweyan pragmatism and classical Chinese philosophy, and I shall now briefly outline some of those converging themes that impact issues of ethics and politics.

Among the many important themes that Chinese philosophy seems to share with pragmatism, perhaps the most central and comprehensive could be called humanism. This is the term

⁵ I use here the translation by Victor Mair, *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1994), 123, 321.

⁶ Mair, 96.

⁷ John Knoblock (trans.), “On Self-Cultivation,” “Discourse on Ritual Principles,” and “Discourse on Music,” in *Xunzi*, vol. 1 & 3 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988, 1994).

⁸ See Jane Dewey, “Biography of John Dewey,” in P.A. Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, 2nd ed. (New York: Tudor, 1951), 42.

⁹ Dewey’s popularity in China was unfortunately short-lived. By the time he wrote *Art as Experience* (1934), there was not sufficient interest in his work for the book to be translated. A Chinese translation of it was eventually put out by Dr. Jianping Gao in 2005.

used by the distinguished scholars Wing-tsit Chan and Tu Wei-Ming to define Chinese philosophy, but also sometimes used by William James, John Dewey, and especially their Oxford ally, F.C.S. Schiller, to characterize or explain pragmatism.¹⁰

Such humanism, which need not exclude a wider spiritual dimension, is not the hubristic view that ordinary human existence is the supreme expression of the universe, and that humanity is defined by its oppositional contrast to the natural world. It is rather the insistence that philosophy is inevitably shaped by the human condition and its purposes should be primarily directed to the aims of preserving, cultivating, and perfecting human life. As knowledge and value cannot be rigidly separated, and as human experience is essentially social experience, philosophy has an ineliminable ethical and social purpose. In other words, philosophy is principally aimed at improving our humanism—not at describing reality for the mere sake of producing true sentences.

¹⁰ See Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 3: “If one word could characterize the entire history of Chinese philosophy, that word would be humanism.” This opinion is endorsed by Tu Wei-Ming, “Self-cultivation in Chinese Philosophy,” *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998), vol. 8, 613–626, which describes Chinese humanism as tending “to incorporate the spiritual and naturalist dimensions in a comprehensive and integrated vision of the nature and function of humanity in the cosmos” (613). This description is also appropriate to the pragmatist vision of James, Dewey, and Schiller, though James tended to use the term “humanism” in a more limited, technical sense that focused on issues of epistemology and metaphysics; for example, the theses that that philosophy cannot purport to provide a God’s-eye view of the world; that its truths are not absolute and fixed but pluralistic and changing; and that such fallibilism and pluralism reflect the changing nature of reality and our plural, changing human interests. See F.C.S. Schiller, *Humanism: Philosophical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1903); Dewey’s review of it in *John Dewey: The Middle Works*, vol. 3 (Southern Illinois University Press, 1977),

Philosophy, as James and Dewey always insisted, deals with realms of experience, action, and meaning that are wider than the realm of formulated truths. As James highlighted the importance of nameless feelings that escape the web of discourse, so Dewey urged that philosophy’s discursive truths find their true value in promoting “concrete human experience and its potentialities,” “to clarify, to liberate, and to extend the goods” of our lives and practices.¹¹

The fixed formulations of discursive truth, though often useful in dealing with the experienced world of continuous flux, cannot pretend to capture its essence or value. Ancient Chinese philosophers, similarly impressed by the world of change, were likewise more interested in perfecting our humanity than in providing a precise linguistic representation of reality. In fact, as Chad Hansen has argued, classical Chinese thinkers primarily regarded language not as a medium for describing the world but, rather, more pragmatically, as a means “of guiding behavior.”¹²

312–318; and William James, “Pragmatism and Humanism” in *Pragmatism and Other Essays* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), and “Humanism and Truth,” “The Essence of Humanism”, and “Humanism and Truth Once More” in *William James: Writings 1902–1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987).

¹¹ William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 244–245. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 41, 305; hereafter EN.

¹² Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 42. Hansen argues that the ways Chinese language differs from Indo-European languages encouraged Chinese thinkers to theorize language differently than in India and Europe, and thus to different views of philosophy and its problems. Some of these differences resemble ways that pragmatism also differs from the mainstream Western philosophical tradition. For instance, “Chinese thinkers don’t get caught up in the familiar problems of meaning. They do not start with a conception of philosophy as a search for definitions” (40). While “Western language ideology . . . treats the key

To the general thesis that philosophy's job is to improve our lives rather than to compile true propositions, there is a clear aesthetic corollary: that the highest function of aesthetics is to enhance our experience of art and beauty, rather than to produce accurate verbal definitions of these concepts, which has been a major goal of analytic aesthetics.

Philosophy is principally aimed at improving our humanism—not at describing reality for the mere sake of producing true sentences.

In *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, I criticize such definitions as “wrapper theories,” since they aim at perfectly covering the logical extension of these concepts rather than at illuminating the importance and enhancing the value of what is defined. In aesthetic matters, as Dewey recognized, such “formal definitions leave us cold.” And William James, whose keen aesthetic sense inspired his early ambition for a painting career, was equally critical: “no good will ever come to Art . . . from the analytic study of Aesthetics,” since the key things in art “escape verbal definition, yet verbal definitions are all that [such]

role of language as conveying ideas, facts and descriptive content,” Chinese thought basically “portrays language as a way people interact with and influence each other.” Hence “the Chinese theory of language starts from pragmatics—the relation of language and user; Western theory focuses first on semantics—the relation of language and the world” (41-2). Chinese theory “deals with assertability more than truth”, and the kind of knowledge that classical Chinese thought is essentially concerned with is not “propositional knowledge” (since “classical Chinese has no grammatically parallel verb for propositional belief”) but a more pragmatic notion of knowledge: “knowing-how to do something, knowing-to-do something, or knowing-of (about) something” (44).

¹³ See John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 155, 220; hereafter

Aesthetics will give.” In short, the real value of aesthetic discourse, including definitions, is of pragmatic guiding toward an improved experience of art; hence Dewey rightly claims that “a definition is good when it points in the direction in which we can move expeditiously” to having such an experience.¹³

Confucian aesthetics seem similarly pragmatic. While Confucius speaks often and passionately about music (noting its varieties, uses, and values), he does not try to offer a formal definition of this art. Suspicious of mere verbal solutions (and more generally wary of linguistic glibness), Confucius instead provides guidance of how to realize musical value in experience by noting examples of musical excellence (and failure), by offering brief but illuminating critical commentary, and by proposing exemplary methods of musical practice:

The Master said of the *shao* music that it is both superbly beautiful and superbly effective. Of the *wu* music he said that it is superbly beautiful but not superbly efficacious.

The Master said “The Cry of the Osprey” is pleasing without being excessive, is mournful without being injurious.

AE; and William James, *The Correspondence of William James*, vol. 8 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 475. This is why I argue that Dewey was basically right to define art as experience even though that definition, by logical-extensional criteria, is clearly inadequate. For my argument, which includes some critique of Dewey's definition, see *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), ch. 2. For a defense of Dewey's theory against my critique, see Tom Leddy, “Shusterman's *Pragmatist Aesthetics*,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 16 (2002), 10-16; and Paul Taylor, “The Two-Dewey Thesis, Continued: Shusterman's *Pragmatist Aesthetics*,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 16 (2002), 17-25. I respond to their critique in “Pragmatism and Criticism,” in *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 16 (2002), 26-38.

In contrast, Confucius claimed, “the Zheng music is lewd.”¹⁴

Besides these evaluative examples, he suggests some concrete methods to heighten the quality of our musical experience.

The Master talked to the Grand Music master of Lu about music, and said: “Much can be realized with music if one begins by playing in unison, and then goes on to improvise with purity of tone and distinctness and flow [or sincerity], thereby bringing all to completion.”

When the Master was with others who were singing and they sang well, he would invariably ask them to sing the piece again before joining the harmony.”¹⁵

Though these pragmatic ways of improving our understanding of music may seem rather fragmentary, thin, or partial, we must not forget that they are meant to be filled in by the rich concrete context of experience, whose enhancement in practice is also the purpose of musical theory.

If pragmatist and Confucian aesthetics aim not at elegantly precise verbal definition, but at improving our experience of art, this does not simply mean increasing our personal enjoyment and understanding of artworks. For art is not only a source of inner pleasure (important a value as that is); it is also a practical way of giving grace and beauty to the social functions of everyday life. Art is also a crucial means of ethical

education that can refine both the individual and society by cultivating our sense of good order and propriety while instilling an enjoyably shared experience of harmony and meaning.

The Confucian insistence on the importance of music and ritual (*li*) as key elements in both cultivating the self and civilizing society makes this aesthetic model of education very clear. These aesthetic practices are more than *merely* aesthetic: they concern the formation of proper order and good government in the character of the individual and of society as a whole.

As Confucius stressed, “in referring time and again to observing ritual propriety (*li*) how could I just be talking about gifts of jade and silk? And in referring time and again to making music (*yu*), how could I just be talking about bells and drums?”¹⁶ He thus urged his disciples:

[My] young friends, why don’t you study the *Songs*? Reciting the *Songs* can arouse your sensibilities, strengthen your powers of observation, enhance your ability to get on with others, and sharpen your critical skills. Close at hand it enables you to serve your father, and away at court it enables you to serve your lord.¹⁷

Confucius likewise urged the study of ritual, without which one would not know “where to stand” or how to behave.¹⁸ But the broader goal of “achieving harmony,” in both self and society, “is the most valuable function of observing ritual.”¹⁹

what is too short, eliminate excess, remedy deficiency, and extend cultivated forms that express love and respect so that they increase and complete the beauty of conduct according to one’s duty.” “Rites are the highest expression of order and discrimination, the root of strength in the state.” The quotations are from “Discourse on Ritual Principles” in *Xunzi*, trans. John Knoblock (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980), vol. 3, 57, 60, 62, 65. Xunzi likewise praises the power of music for harmonizing and ordering both individual and society. As “the guiding line of the mean and harmony, and a necessary and inescapable expression of man’s emotional nature,”

¹⁴ *Analects*, 3.25; 3.20; 15.11.

¹⁵ *Analects*, 3.23; 7.32.

¹⁶ *Analects*, 17.11.

¹⁷ *Analects*, 17.9.

¹⁸ *Analects*, 17.9.

¹⁹ *Analects*, 1.12. The Confucian Xunzi explains ritual’s capacity to harmonize in terms of its nurturing our human senses, emotions, and desires while informing them with a sense of order and distinction so that they will not run wildly astray but will issue in “pleasure and beauty.” A key to ritual’s power of refinement is by providing the proper “mean.” “Rites trim what is too long, stretch out

The aesthetic model of good government through good character and harmony is a model that works by exemplary attraction and emulation rather than by commandments, threats, and punishments. “The exemplary person attracts friends through refinement (*wen*), and thereby promotes virtuous conduct (*ren*).” Attracted to such people, we want “to stand shoulder to shoulder with them” by emulating their virtue.²⁰

So, “if people are proper in personal conduct, others will follow suit without need of command. But if they are not proper, even when they command, others will not obey.”²¹ Moreover, in the Confucian tradition, the propriety of good conduct or character is understood aesthetically; it is not a matter of mere mechanical or grudging compliance to fixed rules, but, rather, requires maintaining the proper appearances that expresses the proper feelings.²² Hence the Confucian emphasis on “the proper countenance,”

Art is also a crucial means of ethical education that can refine both the individual and society.

“demeanor,” and “expression.” Virtue should be somatically displayed as it contributes to social harmony and good government.²³

Pragmatism affirms this progressive role for aesthetics in ethical and political education. Art is more than a private affair of personal taste; and taste itself is always more than personal, since it is socially formed. As an essentially communicative and social practice, art is “the incomparable organ of instruction”—with a harmonizing function.²⁴ In Dewey’s words, art is “a remaking of the experience of the community in the direction of greater order and unity,” and he cites “the power of music in particular to merge different individualities in a common surrender, loyalty and inspiration.”²⁵

If this sounds too close to a fascist demand for conformity to a fixed social order and vision,²⁶ Dewey counters by insisting that “art is more moral than moralities” because it imaginatively offers new visions of better orders than the

“music is the most perfect method of bringing order to men” (ibid. 81, 84). He also suggests how music and ritual complement each other in the work of ordering:

“Music joins together what is common to all; ritual separates what is different” (ibid. 84).

²⁰ *Analects*, 12.24; 4.1; 4.17.

²¹ *Analects*, 13.6.

²² When “asked about filial conduct,” the Master replied: “It all lies in showing the proper countenance. As for the young contributing their energies when there is work to be done, and deferring to their elders when there is wine and food to be had—how can merely doing this be considered being filial?” *Analects*, 2.8.

²³ *Analects*, 8.4. When asked what kind of person is fit to govern, Confucius replies “a person who honors the five beauties (*mei*) and rejects the four ugly things (*e*),” and then he goes on to explain what these things are in such saliently ethical language that leads Ames and Rosemont to translate these terms as “the five virtues” and “the four vices.” See *Analects*, 20.2. In the Waley translation, the terms are translated as “the Five Lovely Things” and “the Four Ugly Things.” See Arthur Waley, *The Analects of*

Confucius (New York: Random House, 1938), 232. The validity of both translations is evidence of the great overlap of ethics and aesthetics in Chinese thought, which was also common in ancient Greek philosophy as the popular expression of *kalon-kai-agathon* (“the beautiful and good”) makes clear. The drawing of a sharp opposition between ethics and aesthetics is an aberration of the compartmentalizing logic of intellectualism that pragmatist aesthetics seeks to overcome.

²⁴ AE, 349.

²⁵ AE, 87, 338.

²⁶ Dewey himself later notes (in *Freedom and Culture*, 1939) the use of art and other aesthetic practices to support totalitarian regimes by making dictatorship seem more attractive than “repressive,” and likewise mentions the Church’s use of aesthetic power to sustain its influence on “the masses.” Dewey also cites the saying, “that if one could control the songs of a nation, one need not care who made its laws.” See *John Dewey: The Later Works*, vol. 13 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 69-70.

community's status quo. Explicitly linking aesthetics to democratic theory, Dewey claims that just as significant aesthetic wholes “must be constituted by parts that are themselves significant apart from the whole to which they belong . . . no significant community can exist save as it is composed of individuals who are significant.”²⁷

I have argued, however, that we need to go beyond the Confucian and Deweyan appreciation of harmony and organic unities in art and society. Art can divide as well as unify, as we see in the conflict of different taste groups, and such conflict can be a competitive spur to creativity. Besides the satisfactions of unity, there can also be aesthetic, educational, and even social value in artistic experiences of heightened fragmentation, dissonance, and disruptive difference.

That is one reason why I devoted considerable attention to rap music and why much contemporary visual art is concerned with images of rupture and disharmony. Moreover, we need to remember more clearly that the aesthetic dimension—in both the creative and appreciative process—involves a crucial critical moment: one where the artist or observer critically assesses the values and limitations of what is being expressed so that she can go on to produce or demand something better.

This means that an aesthetic appreciation of social harmonies should always be alert to discordant voices that are being muffled or excluded from the mix.

Somaesthetics and Chinese Thought

There is an aspect of philosophy as a life practice that my version of pragmatism emphasizes more than most Western philosophies—cultivation of the sentient body as a central tool of self-perfection, a key to better perception, action, virtue, and happiness.

I return, then, to somaesthetics, which is an interdisciplinary field of, not only theory, but concrete somatic practice that aims to promote some of philosophy's oldest and most central goals: knowledge, self-knowledge, virtue, happiness, and justice. When challenged by my Western philosophical colleagues for paying so much attention to the body—which is seen as a necessarily narrow and narcissistic interest that interferes with the wider and nobler concerns of ethics and politics—I find support from Asian philosophers' wise respect for the body. They realize that virtue, care for others, and even the political practice of good government cannot be achieved without bodily means.

As Mencius says,

I have heard of those who, having kept their bodies inviolate, could serve their parents, but not of those who failing to do so, still served their parents. Whichever duty I fail to perform, it must not be my duty to my parents, for that is the duty from which all others spring. Whichever trust I fail to fulfill, it must not be that of keeping my body inviolate, for that is the trust from which all others arise.

He later claims, “the functions of the body are the endowment of Heaven. But it is only a Sage who can properly manipulate them.”²⁸

Moreover, how can one properly govern a state, if one cannot properly care for oneself by

²⁷ AE, 207-8.

²⁸ See *Mencius*, trans. W.A.C.H. Dobson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 138, 144 (4A.20; 6A.14). Proper bodily comportment and skills are, of course, crucial to the key Confucian idea of ritual. It is thus not surprising that “the terms for body (*ti*) and ritual (*li*) are cognate,

sharing . . . the core idea of articulated form” and the common character 豐 as one of the two characters that make up each word. See Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997), 32.

properly caring for one's body? As Laozi says, "he who loves his body more than the empire can be given the custody of the empire."²⁹ Chinese philosophy further realizes that the most persuasive lessons in the art of living can be conveyed without theoretical texts, but through the wordless power of bodily bearing and graceful action of teachers, who instruct by the exemplarity of their persons that complement and interpret the words of their teaching.

As Mencius says, "his every limb bears wordless testimony."³⁰ Consider the exemplarity of wordless teaching exhibited in the bodily behavior of Confucius as recorded in *Analects*:

On passing through the entrance way to the Duke's court, he would bow forward from the waist, as though the gateway were not high enough. While in attendance, he would not stand in the middle of the entranceway; in passing through, he would not step on the raised threshold. On passing by the empty throne, his countenance would change visibly, his legs would bend, and in his speech he would seem to be breathless. He would lift the hem of his skirts in ascending the hall, bow forward from the waist, and hold in his breath as though ceasing to breathe. On leaving and descending the first steps, he would relax his expression and regain his composure. He would glide briskly from the bottom of the steps, and returning to his place, he would resume a reverent posture.³¹

²⁹ See *Tao Te Ching*, trans. D.C. Lau (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963), 69.

³⁰ *Mencius*, 181 (7A.21)

³¹ *Analects*, 10:4. Book 10 of the *Analects* is full of such descriptions of Confucius's instructive bodily comportment, including matters of dress, posture, the taking of food, drink, and medicine, table manners, style of sitting, resting, sleeping, and riding in a carriage. An important counterpart of wordless teaching is wordless understanding. Xunzi explains that a proper understanding of dance cannot be conveyed in mere words or even in visual or auditory representations; it requires fully embodied enactment and funded muscle-memory. "How can we know

* * *

Asian culture has thus coupled the theoretical affirmation of the body with the development of practical somatic disciplines of meditation and martial arts that improve our powers of movement and mental concentration, while giving greater grace to our actions and greater pleasure and acuteness to our consciousness. My efforts to establish the field of somaesthetics as a discipline of theory and practice have been greatly encouraged by the insights of Chinese and other ancient Asian philosophies.

One of the most pervasively influential and painfully stubborn Western dualisms is that of body and mind. As I remark in *Body Consciousness*, Dewey sought to overcome the dualism historically inscribed in these terms by affirming their essential union through linguistic invention—by employing the term, "body-mind," using the hyphen (which the French call a *trait d'union*) to bridge the twain.

Yet, the hyphen, in joining the two, also graphically underlines their separation, just as Benedetto Croce's notion of art as "intuition-expression" unintentionally highlighted the gap between an artist's inner vision and its concrete manifestation in external form. Running together the terms without the hyphen as "bodymind" is no less problematic—for the two terms remain, and the effort to unite them seem clumsily forced and ungrammatical. Moreover,

the idea of the dance? I say the eyes do not see it and the ears do not hear it. Rather, it happens only when the order of every episode of gazing down and lifting up the face, of bending and straightening, of advancing and retreating, and of retardation and acceleration is executed with proper, restrained control; when the strength of bone and flesh has been so thoroughly trained that every movement is in such agreement with the rhythm of the drums, bells, and ensemble that there is never an awkward or wayward motion; and when these, through constant practice, are combined into an ideal that is realized again and again." See Knoblock (trans.), "Discourse on Music," in *Xunzi*, 85.

these ways of orthographically synthesizing body and mind have the further difficulty of prioritizing one of the terms in some way: why “body-mind,” and not “mind-body”? Does being antecedent mean being more basic or essential? Such terminological issues (along with others) led me to introduce the term “somaesthetics” for the research field in which I worked.

The term “soma” (derived from the Greek word for “body”) was unfamiliar enough to be used to capture the self’s purposive unity of embodied mind and mindful body without the dualistic connotations of body and mind, or the negative connotations of “flesh,” or the limiting sense of subjective interiority of the German philosophical notion of *Leib*.³²

Having embraced the term “soma” to develop the idea of somaesthetics, I was happy to find that contemporary Chinese had a similar non-dualistic expression of sentient embodiment, 身体 (*shenti*), whose initial character, in classical times, indicated embodied self and was employed in key moral concepts such as self-cultivation (修身 *xiu shen*), implying cultured selfhood requires also somatic practices and somatic expression of refinement. If somaesthetics has been so successful in China, it is because its

notion of the soma corresponds so beautifully with the notion of *shenti* in rejecting the dualism of mind and body, along with related divisions between thinking and feeling, knowing and acting, inner character and outer expression.³³

If contemporary thinkers in the People’s Republic of China have been extremely receptive to somaesthetics, this is not only because of its link

to classical Confucianism, but also because of its convergence with Marxian ideas.³⁴ Chinese theorists appreciate somaesthetics as a naturalistic, materialist, action-oriented philosophy of human nature (like Marxism), in contrast to the

dominant idealist tradition of Western philosophy. They likewise appreciate somaesthetics’ emphasis on (pragmatist-inspired) meliorism and transformative praxis, along with its appreciation of popular culture. Though I initially was surprised to see my aesthetic theories connected with Marx’s philosophy, I immediately realized that this reflects a broader convergence between Dewey’s democratic, socially-sensitive pragmatism and some of Marx’s philosophical perspectives and democratic ideals.

In recent years, however, several Chinese scholars have also remarked that the spirit of my somaesthetic thinking is perhaps just as close, if

An aesthetic appreciation of social harmonies should always be alert to discordant voices that are being muffled or excluded from the mix.

³² For the diverse reasons I chose the term “soma” over other terms, see Richard Shusterman, *Thinking through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5–8. For my detailed views on the relationship between somaesthetics and the complex German notion of *Leib*, see Richard Shusterman, “Soma and Psyche,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 24, no. 3 (2011): 205–223.

³³ This remarkable affinity compensates for the problem that the Chinese term for “aesthetics” (美学 *meixue*) literally denotes the study (or science) of beauty rather than the broader domain conveyed by the word “aesthetic” as

deriving from the Greek word for sensory perception (*aisthesis*).

³⁴ See, for instance, the symposium on “Richard Shusterman’s Somaesthetics” in *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 10, no. 2 (2015): 163–211, and Zhang Baogui, “The Possibility of Life as Art: A Comparative Study between Marx and Shusterman,” in *International Aesthetics*, 29 (2018).

张宝贵, 生活成为艺术的可能性——马克思与舒斯特曼生活美学思想之比照, 《外国美学》第 29 辑, 2018.

not even closer, to Daoism than it is to Confucianism or Marxism. My style, they say, displays much more freedom, wandering, and nonconformity than is expected from a Confucian thinker. I have been labelled a “nomadic philosopher” because my philosophical trajectory has wandered from analytic philosophy to French and German philosophy to pragmatism and East-Asian thought, as my academic life has led me to experience those different cultures.³⁵

Such wandering—which implies a breaking free from local ties and conventional social duties—is reminiscent of a Daoist spirit. Moreover, rather than concentrating on the high Confucian arts (especially music and poetry), my somaesthetics strongly advocates the practice of non-artistic bodily training disciplines very much the way Daoism emphasizes non-artistic somatic techniques such as deep breathing exercises, varieties of calisthenics, and even special sexual techniques.

Finally, if my faith in the spiritual power of somaesthetics was nurtured by my experience in Japan of Zen seated meditation (*zazen*), then Daoism insists on the similar seated meditative technique of *zuo wang* (坐忘), whose somatic dimension is underlined by its alteration of the body’s normal functions. Consider its description in the *Zhuangzi*, chapter 6:

I let organs and members drop away, dismiss eyesight and hearing, part from the body and expel knowledge, and go along with the universal thoroughfare. This is what I mean by “just sit and forget.”³⁶

Like Confucianism, then, Daoism, emphasizes somatic cultivation, or *xiu shen*, even if it interprets it largely in terms of *shou shen* (protecting the body), *yang sheng* (nurturing life), and of related disciplines of somaesthetic training that are more ascetic than artistic.

In *Thinking through the Body* I go more deeply into classical Daoist philosophy and other Daoist-inspired texts to develop two important themes of my current research, which I mention but cannot discuss here. One theme is the complex relationship between spontaneous action and reflective consciousness in skilled, successful performance. Daoist texts emphasize spontaneity (*ziran*), but a close examination of the *Zhuangzi* and the *Liesi* will reveal that critical or reflective body awareness is also sometimes necessary for successful action and does not always and necessarily inhibit smooth performance.³⁷

The second important Daoist theme in my current research concerns the somaesthetics of lovemaking. Here the Daoist-inspired texts that constitute the genre of *fang-zhong shu* offer many interesting insights, but are easily misunderstood. Michel Foucault gravely misinterpreted them as aiming primarily at pleasure rather than health.³⁸

The Daoist current in somaesthetics finds perhaps its most distinctive expression in my recent book, *The Adventures of the Man in Gold*, not only through its fictional narrative form, its mysterious protagonist, ethereal atmosphere, and Daoist themes, but also through its frequent quotations from the *Dao de Jing*, the only philosophical work cited in the text. The book, as an

³⁵ See, for example, Roger-Pol Droit’s article in France’s weekly newsmagazine *Le Point*: “Richard Shusterman: Philosophe Nomade,” *Le Point* 1839 (13 December 2007): 88-89.

³⁶ A.C. Graham, *Chuang-tzu, The Seven Inner Chapters and other writings from the book Chuang-tzu* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), 92.

³⁷ Apart from *Thinking through the Body*, this theme is treated in Richard Shusterman, “Spontaneity and

Reflection: The Dao of Somaesthetics,” in Ming Dong Gu (ed.), *Why Traditional Chinese Philosophy Still Matters* (London: Routledge, 2018), 133-144.

³⁸ Besides *Thinking Through the Body*, see Richard Shusterman, “Sex and Somaesthetics: Appreciating the Chinese Difference,” in James Behuniak (ed.), *Appreciating the Chinese Difference: Engaging Roger T. Ames on Methods, Issues, and Roles* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2018), 91-110.

illustrated work of philosophical fiction, has the educational goal of making somaesthetic ideas more accessible by packaging them in a form that will attract readers outside the academy—without precluding a useful academic reception.³⁹

Richard Shusterman is the Dorothy F. Schmidt Eminent Scholar in the Humanities at Florida Atlantic University. Educated at Jerusalem and Oxford, he was chair of the Temple University Philosophy Department before coming to FAU in 2005. He has held academic appointments in Paris, Berlin, and Hiroshima and was awarded senior research Fulbright and NEH fellowships. His widely translated research covers many topics in the human and social sciences with particular emphasis on questions of philosophy, aesthetics, culture, language, identity, and embodiment. Authored books include T.S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism (Columbia), Practicing Philosophy (Routledge), Performing Live (Cornell), Surface and Depth (Cornell), Pragmatist Aesthetics (Blackwell, 2nd ed. Rowman & Littlefield, and translated into 12 languages), and most recently Body Consciousness (Cambridge). His non-technical essays have been published in the Nation and the Chronicle of Higher Education and in various art reviews and catalogues, such as artpress and Dokumenta. He directs the FAU Center for Body, Mind, and Culture.

³⁹ Richard Shusterman, *The Adventures of the Man in Gold/Les Aventures de l'homme en or* (New York: Hachette, 2017). The book's Chinese translation, translated by Professor Lu Yang of Fudan University, will soon be

published. For philosophical discussions of the book, see <http://www.fau.edu/artsandletters/humanitieschair/books/man-in-gold/man-in-gold-reviews/>.