

Porous Personhood in Contemporary Sinophone Literature: A dialogue between literature, medicine, and religion

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Abstract

It has been noted by many scholars that liquids, gasses, and winds are vested with particular significance across multiple domains in the sinophone world. Some of the earliest examples of this stem from the medical canon where the importance of liquids, gasses, and winds have remained a central preoccupation from ancient works such as the *Huangdi Neijing* (Kuriyama 2002) and all the way up to modern times (Hsu 2007; Shapiro 1998). This attention to managing liquids flowing in and out of the body is also apparent in hospitals and dental clinics in the contemporary Chinese-speaking world, where the WHO has noted that “a forest of IV fluid stands can be seen in many hospitals and community health centres.” (World Health Organization 2012)

In Chinese religious practice, offerings to ancestors are often burnt or dissolved in water—in other words, turned into liquids and gasses—so that they may traverse the boundary to the domain beyond. Ethereal forces and demons can traverse this porous boundary in the opposite direction, imbuing such passage with potential danger (Mueggler 2001). Water also features prominently in Chinese imaginings of the underworld that is often referred to as the “Yellow Springs” (Lewis 2006, 151). A related legend has it that the deceased meet up with Meng Po, an ancient goddess of wind, whose task it is to ensure that all souls sip of her “Tea of Forgetfulness” before diving into water in order to return to the land of the living. Obviously, the tradition of *fengshui* also focuses attention on the flows of liquids and energies.

Strikingly similar preoccupations tying together liquids, morality, and fate can be found in the sinophone literary and philosophical traditions (Allan 1997; Epstein 1999). In contemporary works of Sinophone fiction, liquids also frequently appear in the most crucial situations. Consider, e.g., the very first page in Yu Hua’s novel *Brothers*, where the main character falls into the public latrine as he leans down too far to sneak a peek at the bottoms of the women squatting in the adjacent room. As the novel explains, the exact same thing happened to his father fourteen years previous, only he ended up drowning in the latrine. Countless other poignant examples could be adduced from authors as different as Liu E, Wang Meng, Huang Chun-ming, and Yiyun Li.

This paper presents an explanation of why liquids, winds, and gasses are so central to the Chinese social imaginary. Through an analysis of fictional works by Chu T’ien-hsin, Liu Cixin, and Hao Jingfang this paper investigates the kinds of anxieties, joys, and hopes that are expressed through liquids and gasses in contemporary Sinophone literature. Building upon the insights derived from this analysis, it is shown how the anthropological notion of “porous personhood” (Bunkenborg 2009) can be combined with insights from cognitive poetics (Sundararajan 2015) and thereby enable us to see that the preoccupation with liquids and

gasses is based upon certain underlying conceptions of the body, of the mind, and of their relationship to the world.

In a broader sense, this paper represents a plea for inter-disciplinarity and scholarly imagination as means of transcending the linguistic and cultural boundaries that tend to restrict dialogue and limit understanding. Paul Cohen has recently noted that Western analyses of East Asia have become so preoccupied with economic and military power that many scholars fail to understand the “undercurrent of intellectual/psychic meaning that flows beneath the surface of conventionally recounted history” (Cohen 2011, 397). This paper attempts to establish a dialogue between the studies of religion, anthropology, literature, and psychology in the hope of enriching the cross-fertilization of ideas across the humanities and into the social sciences.