Kunda in China today is a specific and popular way to describe a female Daoist chujiaren (one who has left family). From the Kundao practitioners in temples to the Kundao masters of mountains, this term captures a profound and complex modern Daoist practice. The word kundao is the combination of two important terms from the Book of Changes (Yijing): kun 坤 and dao 道. Kun refers to Earth as the complement of qian 乾 (Heaven). It is the highest concept that denotes being female and all things representing femininity in the Yijing.

The xianqi liangmu (virtuous wife and good mother) has been a model for all Chinese women, especially in the Confucian tradition. However, there is another alternative way for women to live, which has its own history quietly passed down. It is the tradition of Kundao. These Kundao make a “leap of faith” through their commitment and passion to Daoism. It takes great courage and willpower for the Kundao to defy those well-defined social roles and to pursue her faith, freedom, and self-realization. Entering the temple and eschewing all preordained female functions creates a spiritual and physical space for female construction of their own existence and identity.

This article will first focus on a particular Kundao text for female cultivation. Then, it will turn to an analysis of how the religious Daoist theory and practice illustrate the contemporary feminist conception of the lived body. Ultimately this article points toward a possible Daoist contribution to feminist theory and practice. It is worth mentioning that there is a commonly made distinction between philosophical Daoism and religious Daoism. Philosophical Daoism refers mainly to Lao–Zhuang thought in the texts of the Daodejing and Zhuangzi. These texts provide a primary conceptual foundation for all of Daoism. Yet religious Daoism focuses on the specific methods...
and practices of self-cultivation, usually with the goal of extending one’s life. Although the current text would be categorized as a text of religious Daoism, it manifests a great depth of philosophical vision and I read it here as a philosophical text.

II. **KUNDAO** 呈道 Text

Sun Buer 孫不二 (1119–82) was one of the most prominent female masters in Daoist history. Born to a prominent family in Ninghai (Shandong), Sun was given an auspicious name, Fuchun 福春 (abundant spring). She changed to Buer, “Not Two,” or “Concentrating on One” (shouyi 守一) when she entered the Daoist order. Like many elite women of her times, Sun received an excellent education at a young age, married into an eminent household in her teens, and followed the Confucian path to become a virtuous wife and good mother. She never dreamed of having an opportunity to be active in the public sphere.

In 1167, Sun and her husband, Ma Danyang 馬丹陽 (1123–83), encountered Wang Chongyang 王重陽 (1112–70), the founder of Daoist Total Trueness (Quanzhen 全真) School. Wang had a reputation for attracting converts through a demonstration of extraordinary abilities; the couple was apparently impressed. A year later, Ma bequeathed his wealth to their three children and left a farewell letter addressed to Sun:

Who are you? Who am I? We didn’t know each other, but because of our parents’ arrangement we got married and fell into the trap. We craved wealth and feared poverty. You lost the way and I lost the way. The management of the family’s affairs has consumed my body and the attached feelings captured my will. They made slaves out of my heart and spirit. Fortunately I have met the wind-riding immortal. Now let’s go on a separate path to seek the total trueness.2

At the time Sun was already tempted to lead a Daoist life, but leaving children behind was nevertheless a difficult step for her. It took Wang Chongyang more than a year to finally convince Sun to abandon her mundane life. In 1169, at the age of fifty-one, Sun left home and became a street beggar, commencing her journey to the cultivation of immortality. She eventually settled in a Daoist convent in Luoyang and for the next seven years, cultivated her body, mind, and spirit. After achieving the Dao, Sun traveled to many places to spread the Daoist teaching. Along the way, she attracted numerous Daoist students and converts.

Sun’s reputation eventually led her to become the only female figure among the seven patriarchs of the Northern School of Daoist
religion in the Song Dynasty. Her work has been considered the foundation of the School of Purity and Stillness (Qingjing 清静), which advocated concentrating one’s heart/mind on Laozi’s concept of emptiness and quietness, while exemplifying the Confucian ideals of benevolence and sincerity in action. In Zangwai Daoshu 《藏外道書》(Daoist Texts Outside the Canons), a text titled Kundao Danjue 《坤道丹訣》 was attributed to Sun.3 This text describes fourteen steps in the practice of female inner alchemy (nuneidan 女内丹). A complete translation of these steps with brief explanation follows.4

*Step One: Collecting Heart/Mind (shouxin 收心)*

- Primordial qi already existed before the time of my existence;
- Like jade being ground to reveal its brightness, how could it be possible that more polishing would make it darker?
- Eliminating the seas of desires for life and death to guard the ultimate gate;
- At the place of half a grain of rice where the empty spirit is alert, the adjusted fire is at its perfect temperature.

According to religious Daoist teaching, there are two levels of qi 氣: primordial qi, which is shared by all beings in the universe; and posterior qi, which generates everything as it is. The goal of Daoist cultivation is to leave behind all our posterior desires, such as life and death, and activate the unifying primordial qi in our body. This stage is attained through various techniques, of which this passage suggests two: (i) the awareness of the seed of primordial qi in our body; and (ii) keeping mind in a harmonious yin and yang interaction (symbolized by the perfectly adjusted fire). Here, “gate” refers to the essential parts of human body. Rice is the very small core of primordial qi or the seed of inner alchemy.

*Step Two: Cultivating Qi (yangqi 養氣)*

- The origin begins in non-action, but it then collapses into posterity;
- Once the first sound of crying bursts forth, breathing starts to take control of life.
- Earthly dusts and laboring exhaust one’s life; one’s body is tangled with weakness and illness;
- Abundance of children can benefit the mother, how can we say that we are unable to return to our beginning?

Daoism holds that life begins with the first physical breath, which is all about managing the qi and the mediation between physical form and spirit. Life also consists of mundane activities, which entail all six bodily functions: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, feelings, and will. Following the Daoist teaching is the solution to such an exhausting existence. In this poem, the “children” are a metaphor for the posterior qi and “mother” primordial qi. One can cultivate the first to return to the
second, which will allow one to transcend bodily limits and become immortal.

*Step Three: Moving Energy* (*xingqi* 行氣)

At the place of concentrating breath and spirit, the generating *qi* comes from the east;  
Myriad desires have no place to stay, so only unified breath reaches to the stage of spirit;  
The image of *yin* is descending in the front while the light of *yang* is ascending at the back;  
When the top of the mountain is united with the bottom of the ocean there is thunder after the passing rain.

This step illuminates the Daoist ideal of two interdependent and complementary aspects of *qi*: breathing and spirit (*shen* 神). Spirit is like fire and breathing is like wind. Wind blows on fire and fire burns the substance, together they cultivate *qi*. It is believed that in the early morning *qi* is a living *qi* and in the evening *qi* is a dying *qi*. So the practice of breathing should start in the morning facing east at dawn, when the natural *qi* is rising. This poem also indicates that the cultivated *qi* has different movements. The *qi* of *yin* goes downward from the head at the front while the *qi* of *yang* goes upward at the back. These two movements form one cycle of *qi* movement in the body. Experienced practitioners can feel this movement of the *qi* going through the different body parts/channels and intentionally direct the *qi* as they like. Women need to direct this *qi* from the breast (mountain) to the uterus (ocean). Thunder and rain are two metaphors used to describe the situation where this *qi* is being felt.

*Step Four: Slaying the Dragon* (*zanlong* 鎖龍)

Extreme stillness can generate motion, where *yin* and *yang* coalesce;  
Capturing the jade tiger in the wind and grasping the golden bird in the moon;  
Keep eyes alert to the moment of intercourse of heaven and earth and be aware  
At the meeting places of the magpie bridges, the *qi* of the elixir returns to the stove.

“Slaying the dragon” here implies to completely stop female menstrual flow. The concept of stillness and motion illustrates one of the basic patterns in universe. Like *yin* and *yang*, stillness and motion are interdependent and mutually changeable. They model and become the root of each other. The metaphors of the tiger and moon in the poem imply the force of *yin* and they can all be transformed to *yang*, the dragon or the golden bird (Sun). In addition, the poem reiterates the notion that intercourse between heaven and earth is manifested in a female body. It is the time before menstruation when one has some
premenstrual symptoms. This state is like the qi of heaven and earth interacting in the universe. It is an opportunity for transformation, which can be achieved through the movement of “following” and “reverting.” “Magpie” is the metaphorical name for two different body parts: the place between the eyes in the forehead and the unseen place in the uterus. The bridge is the connection between these two parts. The stove refers to the hollow place between the belly bottom and the back, an acupuncture point, where qi is generated. This phrase indicates that yin and yang are completed by each other. One has to grasp the yang within yin while breathing and pay attention to the movement of yang as it brings a primordial spirit.

Step Five: Cultivating the Elixir (yangdan 養丹)

The captured tiger returns to the authentic spot while the grasped dragon gradually shows the effective elixir; Disposition must be as clear as water while the desires of heart/mind must be still like the mountain; Adjusted breath collects in the golden cauldron and a peaceful spirit guards the jade gate; One can increase the cord of rice every day and a woman’s gray hair can return to youthful radiance.

In this step, the tiger represents qi, while the captured tiger implies that the qi has been properly gathered and controlled. The authentic spot is a hiding place for cinnabar. According to some texts, one is endowed with dan 丹 (cinnabar) at birth, but it needs to be activated through a lifetime of cultivation. For the male this dan hides within the lower part of the body; for the female it is located between the breasts, the first place for generating qi in a woman’s body. The dragon mentioned here is different than “the dragon” being slated in earlier stage. This dragon means shen 神 (spirit). The first line, thus, suggests that one’s shen has been collected through concentration. At this point qi and shen are united, and the divine elixir is formed. The following three lines advocate an intertwined method for cultivation: adjusting qi and guarding shen. The golden cauldron refers to robust fire, the jade gate to the flimsy fire, and the rice to the seed of elixir. A successful cultivation promises rejuvenation of the return of female youthfulness.

Step Six: Embryonic Breathing (taixi 胎息)

In order to arrive at the perfection of the elixir quickly, one must eliminate all stressful situations in the human world; Each movement of the heart guards the spiritual medicine and each breath returns to the beginning of heaven; Qi returns and penetrates the three islands and the forgotten spirit unites with the ultimate void; Whether coming or leaving, wandering just like a Buddha.
*Taixi* refers to internal breathing, which is like the way the fetus breathes within the mother’s body without depending on external air. If one practices *taixi* one does not breathe through the nose or mouth, but breathes internally. It is seen as primordial breathing, the result of unity between *qi* and *shen*. In the inner alchemy texts, the terms infant and embryonic fetus often designate this unity. The spiritual medicine means literally the medicine of the soul, the true breathing. The three islands present three fields of cinnabar where one can accumulate primordial *qi* and foster the unification of *qi* and *shen*. The three fields are: The upper cinnabar field in between eye brows; the middle cinnabar field below the heart and above the belly button; and the lower cinnabar field located three inches below the belly button. These fields are important material and physical spaces for cultivating cinnabar.

Uniting with the ultimate void refers to reaching a higher stage of cultivation. There are two elements related to this juncture. First, one has to reach the stage of forgetting, as noted in Zhuangzi’s teaching. Sitting and forgetting are the foundation of this cultivation and they will make the bodily *qi* clear and light. Second, the outcome of this cleansing will allow one to be connected with the ultimate void or Dao. One’s spirit and the universe are united to become the one. This unity can only take place when all obstacles such as desires and worries are overcome.

*Step Seven: Symbolic Firing (fuhuo 為火)*

At the harmonious place of embryonic breath one must distinguish the timing/opportunity of motion and stillness; The light of *yang* should gradually move forward and the spirit of *yin* should be protected to avoid its flying away; The pearl in the pond reflects the scenery and the moon at the top of the mountain radiates brightness; Be constant and concentrating through the six periods of the day, cultivate the abundant elixir.

This step explains the interaction between *yin* and *yang*, which is the “symbolic firing.” *Yin*, the mild fire, guides *qi* slowly downward; *yang*, the strong fire, makes *qi* moves upward quickly. At this point, one should watch for the movement of *qi* that will generate elixir. The movement of *qi* for a woman is upward to the nipple and for a man downward to the penis. When *yin* and *yang* interact, one should be cautious about their movements. Yang provides movement, but it should be guided in a gradual progressive way. It can move too much or at the time it should not move at all. *Yin* is stillness, but it might be in motion improperly. So one has to watch for the time when the spirit of *yin* attempts to fly away. This is a good example of how the *yin–yang* thinking model can be put into practice. One focuses on the creative
tensions of opposites. The pond here refers to a woman’s uterus, the pearl is the divine fetus, and the mountain, a woman’s breast. Six periods of the day classify different time zones within a twenty-four-hour cycle. This differentiation marks the stillness and movement of *shen* and *qi* as well as the waxing and waning of *yin* and *yang*.

*Step Eight: Receiving the Elixir (jieyao 接药)*

Halfway to grasping the mysterious opportunity, the sprout of elixir appears like a dewdrop; Though it is said that it can stabilize life, it still must be cultivated into a form. Use the nose to smell and receive the pure *yang* while the divine mercury penetrates the bodily spirit. Cultivation must be careful and it will take off as soon as it is complete.

This step teaches the way of stillness and breathing to receive the sprout of the elixir, plant it in the cinnabar field and then nourish it. The notion of receiving medicine comes from external alchemy (*waidan* 外丹), the result of a mixture of mercury and lead fired in a stove. In inner alchemy medicine represents the blend of *jing* 精 (essence) and *qi*. This is the sprout of cinnabar, which should be planted in the cinnabar field and cultivated to become a gold cinnabar. At this point, the elixir has been formed and half the cultivation is done. The formation of dewdrops is a good analogy for the formation of the elixir. Water becomes steam due to heat during the day, and then it is attached to things as dewdrops during the cool night. Through proper breathing, one can become hot then this heat can form the elixir by attachment to the body just as the dewdrop. In the human body, water becomes sperm in the male and blood in the female. These liquids seen as *jing* can be heated and transformed into *qi*, a steam-like form. This *qi* can turn into a solid as the elixir through the work of *shen* (spirit).

*Step Nine: Transforming the Spirit (lianshen 煉神)*

Before birth there was a primordial spirit that once came into my body; Be careful to hold on to it like holding a delicate vessel and be gentle to it as touching a soft infant; The gate of earth must be firmly closed and the palace of heaven needs to be opened first; Washing and reflecting the yellow sprout so that the top of mountain is shaking and booming.

This step demonstrates ways of cultivating *qi*, which the author likens it to taking care of an infant. The gate of earth is the place below the belly button. This door should be closed in the sense that
bodily fluids, such as the sperm in a male body and blood in a female body, should be protected from leaking out. The top of the mountain is the head. This door has to open so that one’s ears will hear the sound of the wind and one’s eyes will see the reflections of lights. Opening the door and closing the door are two interrelated activities. The yellow sprout is another term for the elixir. At this stage of cultivation, one can experience the explosive thunder which might mean a sensation of the overly flowing qi in the body.

*Step Ten: Taking Food (fushi 服食)*

The great molding forms the mountains and ponds and within they contain the essence of transformation;  
In the morning it receives the qi of the sun and in the evening it absorbs the essence of moon;  
At the proper time one can pick up the elixir and return to youthfulness, and the body will become light and clean;  
At the dwelling place of primordial spirit myriad apertures radiate the bright lights.

This step exemplifies the creative and transformative power of producing inner elixir. Furthermore, it teaches that in order to successfully pluck the qi of heaven and earth to form the elixir, one must be able to distinguish the waxing and waning of yin and yang to snatch the opportunity or moment of transformation. Fushi literally means taking food or the elixir, but in inner alchemy it is cultivating a certain stage so that one can produce the elixir. The mountain and pond are complementary elements that can bring about a transformation. If one can pluck the core of the sun and the moon, one will be able to produce the divine elixir. Through diligent cultivation all poles of body will open and reflect light and abundant power.

*Step Eleven: Fasting (bigu 禁穀)*

Get vital qi from food and cleanse, purify the internal organs;  
A mindless spirit has no desire to be attached and the unified ultimate contains emptiness and space;  
Yearning for food one will find mountain taro and hunger will pick magic fungus;  
If one is still involved with the ordinary cooking fire then one can never reach the divine pond.

This step shows the highly cultivated stage of fasting. As one’s body is filled with spiritual qi, she has no need to even think about the food or eating. Fasting or abstaining from food has long been an important method of Daoist cultivation. Zhuangzi describes a shenren (spirit person) who drinks the wind and eats dew, riding clouds and not eating any of five grains. Cultivation needs to cleanse qi in the body and cannot take ordinary and polluted food. Also if one’s body
has received the qi of heaven and earth, one will no longer feel hunger because spirit qi will supply sufficient energy.

Taro is a common food for ordinary people, while the immortals take lingzhi (magic fungus) which has six colors: green, red, yellow, white, black, and purple. If one continues to indulge in common people’s lifestyle, such as cooking and eating, then it means that one takes contaminated things into one’s body and cannot lead to immortality. The divine pond is the place where female immortals inhabit and the location of the Goddess of the West (xiwangmu).

*Step Twelve: Facing the Wall (mianbi)*

Myriad things are all put to rest while one sits at a small shrine in concentration;
A light body rides the purple qi, and one’s purified nature is washed in the clear pond;
Qi of yin and yang become one and the spirit unites with heaven and earth to become three;
The completed training moves toward the jade palace, and a long breath blows out the morning haze of mountains.

This step further points out the result of a long cultivation: After fasting one has no desire for food and is no longer bothered by worldly things. She will, instead, concentrate on meditation. This literally means sitting facing the wall, a method which originated in Buddhist meditation. There is a story that a monk went to the Shaolin Temple in Henan and sat facing a wall for nine years. The purple qi is a persistent Daoist image: a sign of mysterious existence. It was said that when Laozi came cross the Yixi valley, his disciple saw the purple qi rising from the ground.

*Step Thirteen: Coming Out of the Spirit (chushen)*

There is a body outside the body but it has nothing to do with the achievement of skillful magic;
Circulating this spiritual qi activates the primordial spirit;
The bright moon forms golden fluid, and green lotus transforms the genuine jade;
Receiving smoothly the essence of bird and rabbit in the moon;
holding the bright pearl, one never worries about poverty.

This step asserts that when the cultivation reaches a certain stage—when the body has been settled and still—one’s heart/mind can leave one’s body. This stage of generating a body outside of the body resembles giving birth. The child (body) is coming out of the mother (body), and it is not due to magical skill. When the cultivation attains a certain stage, one’s xin (heart/mind) can leave the body as a bird escapes the cage to regain freedom. At the end of this cultivation one
transcends the concerns of earthly existence. One’s mind and body ascend to heaven. The moon has two symbolic meanings in this inner alchemy cultivation: stillness and fullness. From the point of cultivation of xing (human nature), the reflection of the moon appears when all desires have ceased, just as once clouds disappear the moon shines brightly. From the viewpoint of cultivation of ming (human physical form), the primordial qi is fulfilled and ready to be used. Golden fluid refers to golden cinnabar, and the genuine jade to a female immortal.

*Step Fourteen: Ascendant Breaking Through (chongju 沖舉)*

At a good time it will come out of the ravine and fly up to the divine cloud;  
The jade girl rides the green phoenix, and the golden boy sends the silk peach;  
Performing on the pipa in front of the flower and playing the jade flute under the moon;  
Once immortal and mortal are separated one can calmly deal with the waves of the ocean.

This step describes the last stage of inner cultivation. At this time, the shen has returned to ultimate void and is ready to fly away. It is a popular expression for ascending to heaven on a bright day. This phrase depicts the scenery of the Daoist heaven, free of earthly stress, where there is male and female along with wonderful music.

### III. Cultivating a Lived Body

In what follows, I shall synthesize that the fourteen steps of female cultivation discussed above manifest a four-stage Daoist development of body. These four stages are woven into an interconnected continuous fabric of body formation. In other words, the transformation of subjectivity is the consequence of the cultivation and transformation of the body.

The first stage is Zhuji (building a foundation), a cultivation of heart and mind. The goal of this stage is to gather qi (energy), open the paths in the body, and prepare for the transformation of three basic elements of human body: jing (essence), qi (energy), and shen (spirit). This preparatory stage is captured in steps one and two of Sun’s work: collecting heart/mind and cultivating qi. Once one’s heart/mind is collected and guarded then one can start to adjust the qi. This understanding presupposes that the human being originated in the primordial qi (xiantian 先天) shared with myriad things in the universe. The primordial qi exists before one’s individual physical form, mental shape, and entire existence. The particular individual physical
entity is a result of another form of qi, namely houtianqi (posterior qi). There are two kinds of qi operating in the human body: xiantian (primordial) and houtian (后天) (posterior). The primordial qi is directly related to one’s life and death while the posterior qi is connected with one’s daily function. One should cultivate posterior qi for the sake of supporting primordial qi that can ensure longevity. This consists in picking (cai) primordial qi through the breathing meditation of posterior qi. In other words, breathing allows posterior qi to move in a certain way and elevates the mind and body to a higher level. Only under this condition will the primordial qi be utilized and render benefits. At this stage, one links cultivating of xin (mind/heart) with the basic bodily movement: breathing. This simply puts into practice the Daodejing’s ontological foresight of quietness and Zhuangzi’s epistemological method of fasting mind. As the dance of mind and body mingles, the mind emerges in bodily breathing and body engages in a reflective mind.

The second stage is lianjing huaqi (cultivating essence to transform the qi), which covers steps three to five. At this phase, two important events occur. First, one can direct flows of qi through a specific channel of the body. This unique skill requires a great deal of meditation. It enables mind and body to come together synchronistically and dynamically. Second, this stage reveals a unique aspect of the Daoist cultivation between man and woman. The female inner alchemy shares many basic principles with male inner alchemy. In fact, on the general level the transformation from mortal to immortal is the same for men and women. However, the convergence rests in a different understanding of the human body. For example, jing (sperm) is a basic material of the male, so the kidney is understood as a storage place for jing vital to men. The xue (blood) is a basic material for the female, so the heart is considered a storage place for xue vital to women. Transforming jing to qi for the male requires withholding ejaculation and redirecting jing upward to nourish or to repair the brain. For women, this is the time to “slay the dragon,” stopping one’s monthly menstruation. The justification for this practice is that there is an alternation between yin and yang, so that the moment of maximum yin can be converted to yang. Another interesting idea here is the complex relationship of shun (following nature) and ni (reverting from nature). When a woman follows nature she gives birth to a child. But when she reverts from nature she becomes an immortal. The process that Sun suggests involves grasping the moment when yin and yang are in the most harmonious state: snatching the yin within yang and seizing the yang within yin. This is the case of “capturing the jade tiger in the wind and grasping the golden bird in the moon” (verse 4). The process from jing to qi generates an elixir in one’s physical body.
As the result, one’s *xing* (disposition) is clear like water and the desire of *xin* (heart/mind) is still like a mountain. Then proper breathing is required so the vital gate is guarded (verse 5).

The third stage is *lianqi huashen* (cultivating *qi* to transform the spirit), which allows a concrete link between the body and the mind in Sun’s verses six to twelve. At this stage materialization of the body occurs through breathing and the transformation of heart/mind into spirit (*shen*). Through the heart/mind *qi* is becoming *shen* and *shen* becoming *qi*. This linkage of *qi* and *shen* leads to a new entity or process coming into being, called embryonic breathing (*taixi*). This is the one of the most important Daoist goals: One can breathe internally like a human fetus in the womb without nose or mouth. It is a return to the beginning of human life. This breathing method is also called a divine embryo 神胎 (*shentai*) that needs to have a ten-month period of growth and development just like a human embryo. Verses six to eight outline the ways to form this embryo; verses nine to twelve cultivate this embryo and allow it to grow and flourish. The embryonic breathing, symbolic firing, and receiving the medicine all contribute to the bonding between *qi* and *shen*. It is noteworthy that the original Latin word for spirit, *spiritus*, means “breath,” or breathing. In that sense, breathing and spirit were not separated entities even if, through a few philosophers’ work, such as Plato, Aristotle, spirit and breath were divided into two realms, namely mind and body. This severance did not occur in the Chinese intellectual landscape. Verse nine shows that the sprout of elixir needs attentive care, just like a newborn infant. Nourishing this sprout involves three things: taking food in the sense of deriving *qi* from nature; fasting of the mind and the body to cleanse them; sitting (meditating) to become one with heaven, earth, and spirit. As Zhuangzi claims, it is only when one’s mind is empty 虛 (*xu*) that one’s mind can be full (實, *shi*), and therefore be perfected.

The fourth stage is *lianshen huaxu* (煉神化虚; cultivating spirit and returning to emptiness. This is the highest stage of the entire process, an ultimate transformation from “something” into nothing by returning from posterior to primordial *qi*. Although the spirit (*shen*) has been produced in one’s body, it needs to come out or leave the body. This completion of the journey of cultivation takes place in Sun’s steps thirteen and fourteen. This is a mysterious experience. At a fundamental level this spiritual journey materializes a *dan* (elixir) which is a product of the unity of *jing*, *qi*, and *shen*. The Han Daoist text *Taipingjing* (太平經) states: “Long life depends on loving the *qi*, respecting the *shen* and valuing the *jing*.” This triad in human life is the combination of physiological, mental, and spiritual transformation.
Like other Daoist texts, Sun Buer’s work is highly concentrated, its message encoded in hermetical words, terms, metaphors, and language. Nonetheless, in this work she presents the body as possessing important meaning and significance. Hence, her work serves as a valuable resource to support the contemporary feminist construction of the lived body recognizing subjectivity. Clearly to Sun Buer and other Daoists, the female body does not limit a woman’s aptitude for knowledge and transcendence. It is not a hindrance to be overcome or an obstacle to be surmounted. On the contrary, the female body provides a point of mediation between what is perceived as internal and private and what is externally observable and public. The body supplies a natural condition for spiritual attainment.

Contemporary feminist theorists challenge the sex/gender distinction, attempting to open wider opportunities for women’s identity without succumbing to either biological reductionism or gender essentialism. They propose we throw away the concept of gender all together, replacing it with a concept of “the lived body” as the basis for theorizing subjectivity and identity. Iris Marion Young explains: “The lived body is a unified idea of a physical body acting and experiencing in a specific socio-cultural context; it is body-in-situation. For existentialist theory, situation denotes the product of facility and freedom.” That is, our creativity and cultivation begin and remain with the body itself. The person always confronts and deals with the material facts of her body and its connections with her physical and social environment. The body is situated within a complex context. “To claim that the body is a situation is to acknowledge that the meaning of a woman’s body is bound up with the way she uses her freedom.” The concept of the lived body shows that each person is a distinctive and unique body with specific features, capacities, and desires. A person’s subjectivity and freedom are manifested in this body and this particular context.

If the lived body is the core of the construction of one’s subjectivity, then one might ask a further question: What is the body then? The body has become an increasingly critical and highly contested field in feminist theory, yet “there is no consensus as to how it should be treated.” One key question is asked by Alison Adam: “How can feminism naturalize the body whilst steering clear of the twin problems of essentialism and a disembodied postmodernism?” For Sun Buer the body is a valuable laboratory for physical and spiritual transformation. It is the dwelling place of the basic components of human existence: qi and spirit. The body is a gateway to harmonize with the universe (tian di 天地) and ultimate void (wu ji 無極). Since
the current body is incomplete, it has to be cultivated or worked on so that it can attain completion and excellence. To cultivate the basic elements inherent in the body, starting with the *qi*, then *jing* and *shen*, is the only path to extend this space. Sun Buer’s work illustrates how a person should transform the body to attain their own subjectivity and identity. As Merleau-Ponty states, “My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my ‘comprehension’.”14 It is through the cultivation of the body that the world is perceived and makes sense to us. The body is not simply the means to encounter objects; being a cultivated body connects us with the world. Body is the condition and context through which one is able to have relationships with objects both immanent and transcendent. In Merleau-Ponty’s terms, it is our “being to the world.”15 Thus, practices of cultivation produce specific and powerful embodied subjectivities by creating a mental space for one’s own existence.

Sun Buer’s work also probes some epistemological issues around the relationship between embodiment and knowledge. Knowing is not simply a matter of acquiring propositional knowledge detached from one’s body. In fact, knowing necessarily involves bodily experience. In the discussion of the role of body in acquiring knowledge, Lakoff and Johnson offer a prototype that discloses the bodily basis of knowledge and rationality through a connection between philosophy and cognitive science.16 There is no doubt that our conceptual structures must have a neural presence in the brain or a biological basis. It is an illusion that the mind exists, without bodily movement. What then is the connection between the body and the formation of mind’s conceptual or abstract system? Cognitive science shows that “There is no such fully autonomous faculty of reason separate from and independent of bodily capacities such as perception and movement.”17 According to this perspective human thought is not just embodied, but moreover “the peculiar nature of our bodies shapes our very possibilities for conceptualization and categorization.”18 Lakoff and Johnson argue against the objectivist account that concepts are just there in the world for us to grasp through senses, such that the body has no role in the construction of the meaning of concepts. They argue for the embodiment of mind in the strong sense that the actual concepts grow out of bodily structures and capacities and cannot be separated from bodily experiences.

On a broad level, Sun Buer’s formulation of human knowledge starts with bodily training and cultivation, then leads to a stage of conceptual reasoning and understanding. Embodied mind for Sun Buer is an engagement of knowing where body and mind both exist in a shared context. One important leap Sun Buer makes is not simply
about embodiment, but that the body must be cultivated or enhanced in order to advance one’s knowledge. It is only when one’s body attains a certain level that one’s mind is capable of gaining vision and understanding. When the mind loses self-consciousness and the body loses its fixed form, they are intertwined to become one. This basic vision is rooted in Zhuangzi’s fasting of the mind as a metaphysical understanding of the universe. At its basis, the universe is a unified fusion of the oneness with flowing qi. The true sage or Zhuangzi’s zhenren is synchronized with this such that there is no distinction between oneself and others, or between objects and subjects.

Sun Buer’s work also shows how body-based metaphors are used in a conceptual abstract domain. Sun Buer uses metaphors which allow one to make the transformation from a mental imagery experience to the field of conceptual abstraction. For example, breathing is a natural physical activity. But when mind is trained to be empty and directed to be aware of this physical function, the nature of breathing is altered. It is created jointly by physical form and mental consciousness. This new blended breathing is a function of body and mind interacting. The strong dependence of concepts and reason upon the body supports the importance of metaphors and imagery in conceptualization and reasoning. Reason is embodied in a body-based frame of inference. Conceptual processes are intimately connected with our embodied experience. Sun Buer conceptualizes Daoist abstract concepts that it directly tied to the body. This embodiment of reason is seen as “embodied realism.” It is “a realism grounded in our capacity to function successfully in our physical environment.”

In conclusion, Sun Buer’s body-based understanding of world demonstrates how the female body goes through a transformation from a natural embodiment to a spiritual laboratory. One engages in the world through active training of one’s own body. This process requires the mind truly reach a stage of knowing only when the bodily functions are being activated or exercised. In other words, the body is not simply a context or space for one’s subjectivity but also a dynamic and formative process where the mind and the body, knowledge and experience, become one.

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ENDNOTES

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1. Professor Chung-ying Cheng pointed out this distinction.
3. Whether this text is actually Sun’s own work has been hotly debated. However, it is collected in Zangwai Daoshu (Daoist Texts Out the Cannons), vol. 10, no. 370 (Chengdu: Bashu Shushe, 1992), 805, under Sun’s name.
5. The jing, qi, and shen are three important concepts in Daoist teaching. They are most fundamental constituents of human body.
13. Proudfoot, Philosophy of Body, 49.
15. Ibid., 88.