

Body as Metaphor in Chinese Religious Culture:
Implications for Chinese Ecclesiology

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Chinese language and thought provide no exception to the use of the universal natural symbol, the body. From Chinese mythological, philosophical and religious writings can be observed the important place of the body as metaphor: as an analogy for the cosmological order of the universe and for the structure of the state; as the symbolic reference for the moral duty in the preservation and transmission of the ancestral heritage; as the metaphor for expressing the unity and harmonization of opposing forces in nature and human interaction; as the medium of supernatural communication and divinization, and as a metaphorical term for the various manifestations of the religious founders, Lao-Tzu and Gautama Buddha. The body metaphor not only plays a functional role in Chinese religious culture, but also operates at the deeper structural level of certain myths and symbols to mediate between abstract thought and concrete action, to unite language and culture, and to provide cultural orientations as well as models in religious systems.

The purpose of this article is to highlight the use of “body” imagery in Chinese religious writings and culture, including classical writings of the Chinese sages and current religious beliefs and practices among the Taiwanese. Chinese concepts of the individual and community as they relate to themes inherent in the idea of the social religious body are explored, follow by a discussion of how these relate to the New Testament view of the church as the “body of Christ.”

Outlines of the article—

I. Body Concept in Chinese Culture

From selected portions of classical literature and other sources we can display the specific use and significance of “body” as metaphor in Chinese culture.

1. Three religions as one body
2. “Body” in Confucian writings
3. “Body” in Taoist writings
4. The bodies of Buddha (*Buddha-kaysa*)

II. Concepts of Individual and Community

A discussion of the body—concepts in Chinese religious thought is incomplete without a consideration of some of its implications for the Chinese worldview as represented in actual cultural patterns. In view are Chinese concepts of individual and community as they relate to the idea of social body or to ideas with meanings possibly equivalent to the notion of ecclesiastical body in the New Testament.

Concepts such as harmony, *jen* (仁), one and many, and religious community may hold these meanings.

1. One and many
2. *Jen* and *Li* harmonized in community
3. Family as religious corporation
4. Community in Chinese institutional religion
5. Community in Taiwanese folk religion

III. Conclusion