Book Reviews

David Jasper and Ou Guang-an, *Literature and Religion: A Dialogue between China and the West* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2020), ix + 176 pp., ISBN 978-1-5326-5218-9, \$24, paperback.

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Literature, history, and philosophy are conventionally considered the most important intertwined components of Chinese humanities. Given the rich literary and religious traditions of China, it is quite natural to expect that “religion and literature” should be an important research area in the Chinese studies of religions. However, in contemporary Chinese academia, while there are many historical and philosophical studies of Christianity, the studies of Christianity and literature are relatively few. Even fewer are the comparative or dialogical studies of literature and religion in Chinese and Western perspectives. The book under review fills this vacuum with a series of dialogues or experiments conducted by David Jasper, a well-established scholar of Christianity and literature, and Ou Chang-an, a relatively young literature scholar interested in religion.

The book itself exhibits a dialogical structure. Apart from the introduction and concluding reflections, it consists of two main parts. The first part, titled “From East to West,” includes three essays from Ou Quang-an. Each of them is followed by a response from Jasper.

The first chapter is a comparative study of *Zhuangzi* and the book of Job offered by Ou. He admits that the similarities between *Zhuangzi* and the book of Job are more related to the literary style, especially the employment of fictional narratives (14), than to their views on religious or philosophical issues such as suffering and fate (28). In fact, what Ou attempts to highlight are precisely their stark contrasts: whereas the book of Job maintains a staunch faith in God, *Zhuangzi* advocates a more passive

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attitude of “doing nothing” and comes closer to Stoicism. Jasper’s response elaborates the contrasts made by Ou and goes further by making references to the retelling of the book of Job in Western literature, especially the novels by Muriel Spark.

In the third chapter, Ou continues the inquiry of fate by examining Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891) from a Chinese perspective. Ou’s analysis of the novel highlights Tess as a victim of fate, even though Hardy himself might not believe in fatalism. Ou’s analysis makes references not only to the relevant concepts of “fate” or “destiny” in Chinese culture, especially in Confucianism and Taoism, but also to the relevant background in Greek tragedy. In response to Ou, Jasper elaborates the literary background in Greek tragedy as well as the historical background of late Victorian “loss of faith,” but he also wonders whether ancient Chinese culture could have a tragic figure comparable to Tess.

In the fifth chapter, Ou turns to William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), focusing on how his poetry reflects the change of his critical stand on Roman Catholicism and inclination toward Protestantism, especially the Church of Ireland. Ou’s study of Yeats makes no explicit references to Chinese religion or literature, except for a brief mention of a Chinese scholar’s study of Yeats. Jasper’s response shifts the focus to Yeats’s play *Purgatory* (1939), especially the Nietzschean character of its interpretation of purgatory.

The second half, titled “From West to East,” appears to be more theologically oriented. Instead of focusing on a Western theological issue or literary work, in chapter 7 Jasper starts the dialogue with a sketch of the issues involved in Sino-Christian theology, an intellectual movement in contemporary China. The issues include the relationship between Christianity and Chinese culture, Christianity and nationalism, nonreligious interpretation of Christianity, and Christian interpretation of Chinese classics. Being an outsider of the movement, Ou’s response emphasizes the inseparability of literature, history, and philosophy within the Chinese tradition, and thus the subordination of the study of religion under philosophy in Chinese academia, which allows for certain theological methods, including the “scriptural reasoning” associated with Sino-Christian theology.

The second essay from Jasper is a study of Lu Xun (pen name of Zhou Shuren, 1881-1936), one of the best-known writers in modern China. Through analyzing various works of Lu Xun, including "A Minor Incident," which is a relatively overlooked short story but reminiscent of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37), Jasper argues that given Lu Xun's motivation of "save the nation," especially the "soul" or "spirit" of his nationals, through literary works, it is possible to regard Lu Xun as a religious writer offering spiritual medicine for the soul. In his response to Jasper, Ou points out that Lu Xun's effort as a whole is quite understandable against the Chinese cultural tradition as well as his own contemporary context, but Lu Xun's literary works also disclose certain "universal human moments."

In chapter 11, Jasper attempts to decipher the theology implied in some modern Chinese fictions. In addition to Lu Xun's works, Jasper's essay also covers Yu Hua's *To Live* (1993) and *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* (1996), Yan Lianke's *Serve the People!* (2005) and *Dream of Ding Village* (2006), Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* (1990), and others. With reference to the Taoist spirituality of seeking liberation, Jasper drives home the view that literature and theology cannot be separated, especially in the task of liberation. Ou's response supplements that apart from Taoism, Confucianism also plays an important role in the Chinese spiritual tradition and is embodied in, for example, Lu Xun's literary works. Finally, Ou briefly mentions Buddhism and its role in premodern Chinese literature such as *Journey to the West*, which is reminiscent of Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain*.

In the concluding reflections, Jasper makes references not only to Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* to highlight the importance of freedom in literature, but also to James Legge's translation of *The Book of Changes* to underline the difficulties in crosscultural translation and yet to a deeper and fundamentally human commonality that may contribute to the overcoming of these difficulties. Ou then further elaborates these issues with numerous references to Chinese and Western literature and concludes with an "optimistic" note about the future of Sino-Christian theology.

There are several observations or comments to be made about the book in order to indicate that the experimental dialogues conducted in this book can inspire a lot of further investigations in this research area.

First, as the book itself acknowledges, the materials are restricted to those available in English (5). This might be due to the limitation that one of the dialogue partners is not well equipped to read Chinese (148). In spite of this limitation, the book demonstrates a variety of approaches to conducting dialogue in this area. While Jasper's essays in the second part exhibit rather consistently an approach to decipher the theology implied in the literary works by non-Christian Chinese writers, Ou's three essays adopt three different approaches. The first one is on the comparison between a Western text and a Chinese text, and the second a reading of a Western text from a Chinese cultural/religious/philosophical perspective. The third concerns Christianity and Western literature, without significant reference to Chinese literature or religion.

Second, regarding the comparison between ancient Chinese and Western texts, the choice of texts is driven mainly by the similarity of literary style rather than by religious ideas. This may make one wonder whether *Ecclesiastes*, with its ideas about "fate" and "proper time," should be a better alternative for comparison with *Zhuangzi*, if the choice could be based on religious ideas rather than literary style.

Third, the references to Chinese culture or religions are mainly from Confucianism and Taoism, while Buddhism, which features rather prominently in Chinese literature, is largely omitted.

Fourth, as the book itself acknowledges, none of the Chinese writers referred to in this book is Christian (4). It is rather well known that Christianity features in many modern Chinese literary works, and some modern Chinese writers are themselves Christians. Some studies of Christianity and modern Chinese literature have been published in English. A notable example not included in the bibliography of the book under review is Lewis Stewart Robinson, *Double-Edged Sword: Christianity & 20th Century Chinese Fiction* (Hong Kong: Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Centre, 1986). It is important to note that the literary works of Chinese Christian writers, such as Xu Dishan (1893-1941), might exhibit some sort of "fusion of horizon" between the Chinese and Christian (or Western) perspectives. See Chan Wai-keung, "Transcending Differences between Christianity and Buddhism with Love: The Life and Literary Works of Xu Dishan," *Ching Feng*, n.s., 6, no. 1 (2005): 53-75.

There are some minor bugs. First, about Chinese names, there are some cases of mixing up family names with personal names. For example, in the bibliography, “Kam, Louie” should be “Louie, Kam,” whose Chinese name is Léi Jīn Qìng in pinyin. A more glaring example is the running head that features “Guang-an” instead of “Ou,” the family name of the author. Second, the book keeps using “Nestorianism” to refer to “Jīng Jiào” (literally luminous religion), which was established by missionaries of the church of the East during the Tang dynasty and should not be called “Nestorianism” pejoratively.

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