Literature and Religion: A Dialogue between China and the West by David Jaspar and Ou Gaung-an (review)

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theme of homecoming rather than a more clear parallel with the structure of the parable is one that Jack explicitly acknowledges. Given the purpose of the work—to highlight a variety of texts across an extended time period, these interpretive reaches are to be expected and not always objectionable. Rather, the sporadic textual choices across such a wide breadth of time indicate opportunities for further research and connections. There are also chapters, such as chapter 2 on the Renaissance, that rely very heavily on other scholars’ work (Richard Helgerson’s Renaissance Prodigals, 1976, and Ervin Beck’s “Terence Improved: The Paradigm of the Prodigal Son in English Renaissance Comedy,” 1973). Nevertheless, when she does make the connections and brings the argument to a point, Jack’s analysis provides excellent depth and clarity to complicated and layered contextual moments. This text makes a great addition to the Biblical Refigurations series and to anyone’s critical library in the way it highlights the reverberations of such a well-loved parable across the literary landscape for centuries.

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Literature and Religion: A Dialogue between China and the West is an engaging collection of fourteen short chapters whose easy-going tone and brevity may belie the astute selection of texts under scrutiny, depth of each author’s knowledge about and investment in the topics, and the high modelling of civil discourse today in the face of distinct approaches and interpretations.

The introduction rightly refers to the volume’s title as “useful umbrella[s],” distilled in what the authors call “a self-conscious experiment” between David Jaspar from the UK and Ou Gaung-an from China (2), in which they forefront their distinct intellectual cultures, representative of “China and the West,” putting to work the book’s title. The book also puts to work “Dialogue” from the title through the book’s organization. After the introduction, the even-numbered chapters in the first part, “From East to West” (13–86), are penned by Ou Gaung-an and odd-numbered ones, which are responses, are penned by David Jaspar. The main chapters in this part are Guang-an’s “Literary Similarities and Cultural Differences: A Comparative Study of Zhuangzi and the Book of Job” and Jaspar’s “The Book of Job and Zhuangzi: A Response” followed by paired chapters on Thomas Hardy’s Tess D’Urbervilles and Yeats’s poetry. In the second part, “From West to East” (89–142), Jaspar and Gaung-an switch roles, with Jaspar penning the odd-numbered chapters on “Issues in Sino-Christian Theology,” Lu Xun, and the interface of Chinese modern fiction and religion, and Guang-an responding in the even numbered chapters. The volume
ends with “Concluding Conversations,” constituting of a chapter by each author and a suggested further reading with a manageable bibliography of fourteen well-selected texts from 1999 through 2019.

The two authors’ individual voices emerge clearly in their respective chapters, as do their respect for the other’s interpretations, at times very contrastive. To take just one example from the first part, Jaspar describes and engages with such topic sentences as “What strikes me most forcibly in Guang-an’s dialogic review of Zhuangzi and the book of Job are the ultimately quite different foundations,” which sets Jaspar to share his own astute interpretations about a biblical text that is often taught in Bible as literature courses (30). Both authors express the ways that their discussions might inform future academic research and pedagogy; hence their selection of major texts and male authors that are regulars in Western classrooms. This book is building so many bridges that their selections are understandable and offset by the many women scholars whose studies they invoke.

Chapters 4 and 5 on Tess D’Urbervilles encompass major ancient and Western works of tragedy in a strong evaluation of the character of Tess and of the religious aspects of tragedy, and its concomitant representation of fate, put in useful dialogue with Taoism and Buddhism. In “A Textual and Cross-Cultural Investigation of ‘Fate’ in Thomas Hardy’s Tess of the D’Urbervilles,” Guang-an discusses, first, chief Western works that lead to the question of whether “religious doctrines or social rules [can] be altered so that Tess can be saved” (46). The second part of the chapter, sub-titled “‘Fate’ Compared in Chinese Culture,” demonstrates how Chinese characters, Confucian concepts, and Chinese-to-English translation can help readers seek their answers to that question and can be brought to bear on the form of the tragedy and the novel, including their religious extensions. Guang-an’s use of the singular “reader” and Jaspar’s occasional monolithic claims, such as “Tess of the D’Urbervilles, like all great tragedies, strikes a universal chord in all readers,” reflect a belief—by the authors and many readers—in shared standards, characteristics, or elements of literature and reader response (54, 59). Yet, they also clarify points of disunity and difference. Jaspar ends this set of chapters with “Would Tess have ever been possible in the ancient culture of China? I think not, in the end” (60).

The second part, “From West to East,” provides strong inroads for Anglophone readers to engage with a number of Chinese authors and works with which they may be unfamiliar. Jaspar starts off the first chapter in that Part, chapter 7: “Issues in Sino-Christian Theology,” candidly admitting that he—with his many years of and strong dedication to intercultural dialogue—is “very conscious” of his “perspective of a Western Christian theologian with a very limited grasp of Chinese language and an outsider’s view of the constraints upon religious belief and practice in contemporary China” (89). He thus invites readers to acknowledge their limitations. The rest of chapter 7, conversely, enables readers to see what can be done, nonetheless. He brings to bear his experiential and textual learning about
Sino-Christian theology for a selective historical overview, which Guang-an’s response nuances. The ultimate outcome they model and foster is a deepening of religious studies and literary studies in full acknowledgement of doing so from an “outsider” or “out-of-the-circle perspective, as a short poem by Bian Zhilin suggests: ‘You are standing on the bridge looking at views, / The person looking at views from a window is looking at you. / Bright moonshine decorates your window, / While you decorate someone’s dream” (102). The poem captures the capacious point of view that innovative and respectful scholars, readers, and artists have honed through the centuries, resulting in curation and appreciation rather than appropriation with respect and curiosity clearly at work.

Jaspar’s and Guang-an’s chapters 9 and 10 convinced me that Lu Xun should be considered as a strong candidate for study because of the very complications in relation to spirituality, or what may also be called a worldview, that this author represents. Guang-an rightly characterizes Lu Xun as a “literary giant in China,” one that is not regularly on world religion and literature courses in the West (118). I am left better equipped to discuss Lu Xun and other Chinese authors after having read their chapters.

I have stressed in this review the approach that most engaged me in reading Literature and Religion: A Dialogue between China and the West for the first time and when I returned to the book and looked at how and where I marked my copy. My marginalia—more than the typical amount—about other Chinese works in English translation that I know, as well as canonical and relatively obscure Western texts that abide with me, demonstrates that I accepted the invitation to converse with David Jaspar and Ou Gaung-an, as well as with the appropriately defamiliarized Western texts and the Chinese texts that I remain unfamiliar with but will strive to become familiar with. I recommend this book for novice, journeyperson, and specialist readers alike.

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Ascent announces itself as the first book-length study of Paradise Lost by a philosopher, and it reads very much like a complementary coupling between accessible inquiries into long-standing issues of philosophy and the questions at the heart of the poem. However, Zamir does not intend to bring philosophy and poetry into tidy harmony with each other. The book as a whole approaches the two as an odd couple: companions climbing a mountain together who achieve something special (a breathtaking view) but, ultimately, remain discreetly themselves.

The structure of the book follows closely this metaphor of ascent. The chapters are split into two varieties—climbs and crossroads—the former