Introduction

David Jasper and Ou Guang-an

In 1901 the English sinologist Herbert Giles published his *History of Chinese Literature* as a volume in Heinemann's popular series of Short Histories of the Literatures of the World. In his first sentence Giles claims that this was the first attempt "in any language, including Chinese, to produce a history of Chinese literature."[1] Although some English literature, not least the works of William Shakespeare, and the Bible were known in Chinese in the nineteenth century, there was relatively little literary exchange between Chinese and Western[2] culture until the twentieth century, during which the political and cultural changes in China impeded much exchange until the very end of the century.

From the beginning of the present century things began to change rapidly. Kam Louie of the University of Hong Kong and editor of the *Cambridge Companion to Modern Chinese Culture* (2008) writes:

> Interest in Chinese literature, philosophy, cinema, *qigong*, and other cultural artefacts around the world is stronger now than ever before. There has been a plethora of books about Chinese culture published in anglophone countries and a steady increase in students enrolling in courses on Chinese language and civilization.[3]

Many Chinese students come to study at universities in Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand, while academics and students from these countries are now welcomed to teach and study at Chinese

1. Giles, *History of Chinese Literature*, v.

2. The term "Western" we acknowledge is problematic, as if the world was divided between China and "the West." Given that this book is a conversation between a Chinese and a British scholar, we use the term advisedly and in full recognition of its limitations.

3. Kam Louie, "Defining Modern Chinese Culture," 1.

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universities. But the conversations in this book are not simply literary. Its authors met and became friends while studying in Hong Kong at the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies at Tao Fong Shan, a Christian center founded in 1930 by the Norwegian missionary Karl Ludwig Reichelt to promote dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity. "Religion" is not an easy word to define, but it cannot be easily dismissed in intercultural literary discussions.

Kam Louie acknowledges that the opening up of Chinese culture in Western minds inevitably has a historical dimension "with contemporary culture reproducing and modernizing relics of China's historical past."[4] The rapid development of Confucius Institutes, sponsored by the Chinese government in universities around the world is indicative of a self-conscious connection between contemporary culture and education and two thousand years of the study of the writings of Confucius in China. Whether "Confucianism" is a religion is highly debated, but certainly the missionary and scholar James Legge, the first Professor of Chinese Language and Literature in the University of Oxford clearly regarded it as a religion in his influential work *The Religions of China: Confucianism and Taoism Described and Compared with Christianity* (1880). In the West, on the other hand, it is clear that the Bible has continued to exercise huge influence in literature and culture far beyond the limits of religious belief. Our conversations reflect this broad sense of "religion" in culture and the role of literature in its expression.

The chapters and responses in this book are by way of a self-conscious experiment. They are offered in the form of a dialogue between two scholars within the humanities in China and the United Kingdom. Ou Guang-an is a professor of English at Shihezi University, Xinjiang in the People's Republic of China, at the time of writing also a Visiting Scholar in the University of Edinburgh. David Jasper is Emeritus Professor and formerly Professor of Literature and Theology at the University of Glasgow in Scotland. He has also taught for many years at Renmin University of China in Beijing. They met in Hong Kong some years ago, and this book is the fruit of many discussions and a growing friendship, something that lies at the heart of all good academic discussions

No-one can deny that both China and the West (we will keep to that term as a useful umbrella for the culture of Europe and the broader English speaking world) have ancient cultures that are deeply *literary* in forms of

4. Kam Louie, "Defining Modern Chinese Culture," 2.

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poetry and narrative. While the concept of the Axial Age as proposed by Karl Jaspers in his book *The Origin and Goal of History* (1949)[5] is debated as a "myth" it is still powerful in such influential works as Robert N. Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011). Implicitly our conversations still acknowledge the power of Jaspers's vision. In the culture of both China and the West we can discuss the "novel" or different kinds of fiction that are profoundly embedded in our histories and yet have the power to speak beyond that embeddedness. Cultures, like people, can converse with one another through their literatures. The matter of religion or theology, on the other hand, is much more problematic. Our assumptions about religion in this book begin largely (though by no means exclusively) in the "Christian West," though this might better be described as a culture that is immersed on many levels with the thought and literature of the Bible, both in matters of belief and in literary and philosophical discussion. China, in this respect, is more difficult and far more complicated than the term "Confucianism" can often seem. A simple and straightforward way to summarize the major influence on the Chinese people's minds and practice, in tradition and in general terms, is by the so-called "three religions" (Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism), but none of them has occupied such an essentially religious or theological position as that of Christianity and the religions of the Bible in the West. We will be addressing the issue of "religion" in China, and how that word is to be understood in due course. Herbert Giles was dismissive of religion within ancient Chinese culture, once describing "China's greatest men [as] rationalists at heart."[6] Nothing, of course, is ever that simple.

Our conversations, we readily assert, have taken place largely in the context of the relationship between literature *and* religion. From the outset it should be clear that we have found time and again that there are profound differences between us, often not understood by either of us in their entirety, and that these differences should not be underestimated or ironed out in any superficial way. Rather it is from the very acknowledgment of such deep differences that true and trusting friendships can grow in an atmosphere of respect and tolerance that allow dialogue and conversation without demanding the kind of agreement which usually means the rough appropriation of one side by the other. This we have steadfastly tried to avoid. Let each be true to themselves, and perhaps the best we can hope

5. Anticipated by the now-forgotten John Stuart Stuart-Glennie in 1873.

6. Giles, *Travels of Fa-hsien*, ix.

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for is a kind of "poetics" that acknowledges diversity without fundamental disagreement.[7]

Of continuing importance for Christian theological reflection is George Lindbeck's now quite old book *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984). From Lindbeck's argument we might propose a "cultural linguistic" model for religious understanding in which "the cognitive aspect, while often important, is not primary."[8] Rather imaginative literature, refusing the notion that all religions are basically similar,[9] and unwilling to tolerate abstractions, draws upon religious symbolisms whereby "the basic patterns of religion are interiorized, exhibited, and transmitted." What then becomes crucial is the telling of a story which "gains power and meaning insofar as it is embodied in the total gestalt of community life and action."[10] We begin to find that we are now talking on common ground, whether Chinese or English, and as we set aside for a moment the theological matter of the "transcendent God," Lindbeck's liberal proposals suggest how such a linguistic-cultural model of religion as found in the literatures of any culture might relate in one way or another to liberationist critiques of all forms rather than simply remain complicit with Western philosophical ontologies and ideologies with their often colonial and imperial structures of power and domination.

This, then, is a helpful time for more liberal forms of Western religious thinking as this is a moment in history when the literature of ancient as well as contemporary China is beginning to become more widely available to Western readers, essentially for the first time. This literary voice of China is in no way to be confused by Western readers with a writer like the Japanese novelist Shūsako Endō (and his best known work *Silence* [English translation, 1969]), not only because they are Chinese (a distinction alarmingly still lacking clarity in some Western readers) but also because none of the Chinese writers we read in this book are Christian, unlike Endō. The shift that is of importance to us has been suggested by the Chinese scholar (now working in Hong Kong and formerly in the USA), Zhang Longxi in his book *From Comparison to World Literature* (2015) where he argues that the assumptions of comparative literature, which have hitherto been largely Western, are now expanding to a more genuinely global model that takes more seriously the place of Chinese literature with its very different history

7. See further, Jasper et al., *Poetics of Translation*.
8. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 35.
9. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 41.
10. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 36.

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and cultural context. In literary terms, and despite all other differences, we are all members of one global family.

To adapt an image of Maurice Blanchot, religion may then be discussed within the "space of literature" with a passion that is without religious or theological pretensions, but still demands a response from religion.[11] It is not, of course, the task of literature to articulate or construct any theology, Christian or otherwise. The novelist, poet or creative writer is not in any sense a theologian or even a religious thinker by another name. But, the creative writer may begin to explore anew the suffering, joyful narratives and moments in human experience that may prompt afresh the task of theology with its different creativities and purposes, Christian or otherwise.

It is in this light that we approach the texts, Western and Chinese, which are discussed in this book. We began with the agreement that each would read and comment on texts and ideas drawn from deep within the other's culture, prompting a response from within the parent culture in each case. (One major limitation is that all our reading is in English and not in Chinese.) We recognize that whether we are reading W. B. Yeats, Thomas Hardy, or Lu Xun, we are confronted by the question as to what is meant by the "spirit" or "soul" of a people, and we are also confronted by the fundamental matter of truth, a term that is universally hard pressed in our modern political and global culture of "post-truth." What will become clear from our discussions is that it is, of course, perfectly possible for a Chinese scholar to read Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) or for a British scholar to read Lu Xun's novella "The Real Story of Ah-Q" (1923), but each does so with a perhaps inevitable sense of alienation and even disorientation. It is precisely this that prompts and demands serious dialogue and discussion. We have found that we need each other in our meticulous task of mutual and cross-cultural understanding. This is not a task that can be done alone. Of course it would be true to say that the contemporary Chinese novelists read here (by David Jasper)—Yu Hua, Yan Lianke, Sheng Keyi and others—all elicit echoes from other literatures, not least the literature of the West. For example, Yan Lianke's *Serve the People!* (2007) certainly begs comparison with Jaroslav Hasek's comic satire *The Good Soldier Švejk*. This is an instance of intertextual literary resonance that cuts across all cultural and historical barriers in literature.

But, of course, to say that something reminds you of something else is not to admit that they are the same. Nevertheless, it is still a starting point

11. Blanchot, *Space of Literature*.

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for understanding and conversation. An intrinsic part of the writing of this book has been the questions we have been prompted to ask each other. Often they have arisen out of an admission of ignorance, for what is obvious in one culture may be utterly remote from another. These are questions that must be posed in a genuine spirit of enquiry, and very often we have had to be content with the response, "Yes, I *think* I see what you mean." That is as good, sometimes, as it can get, but that is at least something—a start. And so all conclusions must be reached with an awareness of the matter of *tolerance*—something which every culture has sometimes found difficult, however liberal or open it thinks itself to be. And more often than not it is in matters relating to sex or religion (two large preoccupations of all literature in the end) that cultures are most hesitant, private and nervous.

One of the most widely read cultural critics in both the West and China today is Terry Eagleton, whose relationship with religion has always been edgy and complicated. In one of his recent books, *Culture and the Death of God* (2015), Eagleton addresses the *superfluous* nature of religious belief, either because it is regarded as increasingly irrelevant (in the West), or as presenting a difficulty to a ruling ideology (as in contemporary China). Eagleton writes:

> If religious faith were to be released from the burden of furnishing social orders with a set of rationales for their existence, it might be free to rediscover its true purpose as a critique of all such politics. In this sense, its superfluity might prove its salvation.[12]

In one sense, as religion becomes less important it begins to rediscover its true critical voice. And that critical voice can be heard in many of the texts from literature that we will be reading in this book—texts that sometimes seemingly ignore religion or are at odds with it as it is established in society. Or is it that we are finding this a way, by literature, more simply (and mysteriously) to recover our true humanity across every potential boundary of division—cultural, racial, religious and so on. Literature can help us to loosen the ties of religion from its particular philosophical and theological roots, noting, with Eagleton, that, for example, Christian theologies are often "too indebted to neoplatonic and ahistorical understandings of transcendence to be of use for . . . Christian praxis."[13] The literary freedoms of every culture, being more inclined to recognize a universal

12. Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God*, 207.
13. Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God*, 206.

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rather than a culturally specific community of texts, help us move towards such freedoms.

We realize, of course, that such reflections pose many difficult and complex questions for philosophy, theology, cultural studies and literature itself. A dialogue or conversation such as is found in this book will often pose more, and more interdisciplinary questions than it can possibly answer. But such a conversation is itself a kind of *praxis*—a practical discussion between friends who are willing to try and learn and discover their fundamental commonality in a world which is all too often deeply divided in so many ways. Here there has been no motive of coercion or desire for conversion. We have tried to respect the other's views while not denying our own. The truth perhaps is that such dialogical conversations are finally more important and more humane than all dogma, doctrine or assertion.

"Dialogue" indeed is the very word to properly describe the whole process of writing this book. It begins in actual enthusiastic dialogues and discussions held in a café near Waverley Station in Edinburgh or a seminar room in the University of Glasgow. Such dialogues are continued when we are drafting our own chapters and responses to each other. Behind all these dialogues, there is possibly a further intended dialogue that is meant to take place between we two authors and our readers. All these dialogues, in one way or another, fall into the paradigm of conversation between oneself and the other, and finally between oneself as another.[14]

With this appears the urgent and intriguing question: why do we have to converse or make dialogue? Why does David Jasper have to read the stories of Lu Xun and Ou Guang-an read the poems of Yeats? The answer is, finally, to know more and to communicate better. In the story of Babel (Gen 11:1–9), the paradox, it seems, is that it is only by not knowing (God "confused" language so that the Babel tower could not be built) that people began to know themselves. In the book of Job, by questioning the way of God to "good people," Job finally came to understand his own limitations and foolishness in trying to know the one who cannot be known. In the *Odyssey*, when Hermes is plucking the moly and pointing out the nature of the plant to Odysseus, it is seen that the god thus helps Odysseus to save his companions who had been changed by Circe into pigs. Instead of showing his magic power as one of the Olympian gods, Hermes is actually showing Odysseus the way of knowing himself.[15] In an ancient Chinese fable (with

14. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*.

15. Homer, *Odyssey*, 163.

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universal resonances), five blind men, when they are touching each part of an elephant, tell each other that what each one sees is the whole picture of an elephant. Paradoxically, Laozi argues that the Way in Daoism can be known, but the known Way is not the normal Way. While Confucius taught his disciples that if you know something you do indeed know something, but if you do not know something definitely you cannot claim that you know something. Thus it can easily be seen that knowing is not an easy thing. If to know oneself is indeed difficult, then what is the need to know "the other"? The answer can also be easy: to know "the other" means to achieve a better understanding of oneself, and, indeed no-one is an island. As literature is universal and yet is so profoundly embedded in a certain culture, so it may be that what is glaringly obvious to one person simply passes another by without notice. It is only when one points out what is "obvious" to himself but not the other that one begins to achieve a better understanding or a fuller picture of the whole "elephant." Meanwhile, in the conversation, when one tells a story, the other may immediately echo a similar story in another culture. For example, the "prodigal son" image in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* prompts a similar image in *The Story of the Stone* (*The Dream of Red Mansions*), a classical Chinese novel, though with radical difference in religious and culturally specific connotations. The culturally specific difference and the possible similarity in narration archetypes are the very fabric that adds sparkle to our conversations. In the process of exchange there is an inevitable act of one trying to enter into another culture by familiar references and echoes. This process of cultural exchange immediately evokes in both of us George Steiner's proposal of four phases in translation. The process of translation lies at the heart of all conversations, together with the question, what is, after all translation, after Babel?

In today's "postmodern" world it is easy to become "lost in translation" and to lose the power to communicate with others in a quite different cultural environment. In all our conversations and discussions we have found that the culturally specific phenomenon can be so profoundly embedded that the transition from one cultural context to another can be finally impossible. There are times when the cultural specific phenomenon in literature, for example the iambic pentameter in a Shakespearean sonnet or a fixed rhyming tune in a poem of the Tang Dynasty, is ultimately utterly untranslatable, reflecting Robert Frost's words that "poetry is something lost in translation."[16] However, despite all our cultural differences, we did

16. See also Merrill, "Lost in Translation."

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not finally lose ourselves in "translation," because we continued to recognize the differences in translating from culture to culture without demanding an absolute agreement. The dialogical principle held in all our conversations. That lies at the very heart of the book that is to follow.

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