

Book Review

Brahman and Dao: Comparative Studies in Indian and Chinese Philosophy and Religion. Edited by Ithamar Theodor and Zhihua Yao. Studies in Comparative Philosophy and Religion. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-7391-7172-1. Price: \$126. Hardcover. 291 pages.

This is a pioneering work which deserves unequivocal endorsement for its many merits. Before I go into spelling them out, however, it would be useful to list the various chapters in this edited volume in the interest of conveying the range of this work: “One, Water, and Cosmogony: Reflections on the *ṚgVeda* X.129 and the *Taiyi sheng shui*” (Zhihua Yao); “Exploring Parallels between the Philosophy of Upaniṣads and Daoism” (Ram Nath Jha); “The Way of Silent Realization: Ineffability and Rationality in the Philosophical Mysticisms of Śaṅkara and Zhan Ruoshui” (Sophia Katz); “Impermanence and Immortality: The Concept of *pañca-skandha* in Buddhism and in Twofold Mystery Daoism” (Friederike Assandri); “*Li* and *Dharma*: Gandhi, Confucius, and Virtue Aesthetics” (Nicholas F. Gier); “Ethics and Metaphysics in the *Bhagavadgītā* and Classical Chinese Thought” (Ithamar Theodor); “Communal Moral Personhood and Moral Responsibility in the *Analects* and the *Bhagavadgītā*” (Alexus McLeod); “Ethics of Compassion: Buddhist *Karuṇā*- and Confucian *Ren*” (Tim Connolly); “Why “Besire” is not Bizarre: Moral Knowledge in Confucianism and Hinduism” (Yong Huang); “Yoga and Daoyin: History, Worldview, and Techniques” (Livia Kohn); “The Emergence of Classical Medicine in Ancient China and India” (Wei Zhang); “Health, Illness, and the Body in Buddhist and Daoist Self-Cultivation” (Joshua Capitanio); “Indic Influence on Chinese Language” (Guang Xing); “Magical Alphabet in the Indian and Chinese Minds: From the Garland of Letters to Master Pu’an’s Siddham Mantra” (Bill M. Mak); “Mixed up on ‘Matching Terms’ (*geyi*): Confusions in Cross-Cultural Translation” (John M. Thompson); “The Ludic Quality of Life: A Comparison of

the *Caitanaya-caritāmṛta* and the *Zhuangzi*” (Carl Olson); and “The Poet and the Historian: Criticism of the Modern Age by Rabindranath Tagore and Xian Mu” (Gad C. Isay).

To turn now to the book after surveying its contents: first and foremost, it opens up a new dimension in comparative studies in religion and philosophy. The field of comparative studies in religion and philosophy has been held back by a major drawback during the course of its progress over the past few decades, namely, that Western religion and philosophy have tended to occupy the polar position in such studies as the center of comparison. Thus comparative studies in Western and Indian philosophy are not wanting, nor books on Western and Chinese philosophy, but Western philosophy continues to occupy a virtually hegemonic position as the standard reference point in such works. This book breaks new ground in comparing Indian and Chinese religion and philosophy directly, without using Western thought as a mirror. The West is still a mediating factor in these comparisons (even in criticism *see* 268-272) as the book is in English and often uses Western categories but, nevertheless, the dialogue thus taking place is between India and China.

This dialogue between the two is facilitated to a certain extent by the shared heritage of Buddhism, and Buddhism’s history of interaction with Daoism, despite a fundamental overall divergence in the orientations of Buddhism and Daoism, given Buddhism’s concern with impermanence and Daoism’s fascination with immortality. There is also the intriguing convergence in Yogic practices between India and China which could indicate the influence of one on the other although the direction of influence is not clear. There is also the possibility that both are drawing on a common (Himalayan) source. The issue whether A influenced B or vice-versa, or whether both were influenced by X are the usual options in such situations. The book resists this temptation of the historian and prefers to take the position of the Phenomenology of Religion, which also happens to be quite commonsensical, that before “we can undertake such

challenging issues, we need to undertake a phenomenological study describing the similarities and differences as found between Indian and Chinese philosophy and religion” (xi), in such matters.

The comparisons which are made without the intervening variable of Buddhism between Hindu and Chinese thought are quite suggestive, especially when the concept of sattva guna is brought in relation to junzi and Yin and Yang (chapter 6). The point, however, needs to be considered that in Hindu concepts of soteriology the final goal typically transcends sattva guna (Bhagavadgītā 2.45, etc.), although it remains a cardinal element in Hindu cosmology if only to be transcended. It is true that the comparison of the three gunas with Ying and Yang is not immediately obvious as it involves the comparison of a binay (Ying Yang) with a triad (Sattva, Rajas, Tamas). However, by regarding Rajas as the force behind Sattva and Tamas the asymmetry is imaginatively overcome.

Can such comparisons go beyond comparison in yielding a new category generated by the comparison but not limited to it? Yong Huang (119-142) comes close to achieving this in his conceptualization of “besire” as a combination of “being” and “desire”. The neologism arises from the need to overcome the distinction drawn between knowledge (being) and motivation (desire) with the implication of their being two distinct mental states in modern Western thought but neo-Confucianism and Advaita Vedanta allow for their simultaneity. Such an attempt catches something which might otherwise escape us is the fact that that although we usually distinguish between fact and value, we could experience “falue” that is, both together as when we might simultaneously experience both the veridical and the salvific property of the ultimate reality. That such creativity could synergistically arise in the context of making comparisons is an exciting prospect and bodes well for the comparative exercise.

I would like to conclude this review of this admirable book with two suggestions. The first is that both India and China had to coin new words to correspond to the European word religion. To be more accurate, China had to coin a new word, namely, Xongjiao, just as Japan had to coin Shukyo, and India had to coin new meaning for it started using the word Dharma as an equivalent. The significance of this shared need in terms of the comparative study of Indian and Chinese philosophy and religion might be worth exploring. The second is that both Indian and Chinese religion and philosophy may be more oriented towards duty-discourse as compared to the rights-discourse of the West, as indicated by the pairing of Li with Dharma. Now duty-discourse may be a useful corrective to the excesses of rights-discourse but duty-discourse is also vulnerable to what might be called deontological exploitation. That is to say, one could deny people their rights by insisting that we focus only on our duty. It would be worth examining whether Indian and Chinese thought provides any safeguards against this vulnerability.

References

Theodor, Ithamar, and Zhihua Yao. 2015. *Brahman and Dao: Comparative Studies of Indian and Chinese Philosophy and Religion*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

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