

The Interdisciplinary Nature of Literature and Theology and its Potential Value¹

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Abstract:

Responding to the questions of “theory and theology in Chinese literary studies” and tracing back to the interaction of literature and religion in the tradition of Chinese *jingxue* (study of the classics/scriptures), the author concentrates on the correlation of “poetry” and “classics/scriptures” that were really valued in the process of cultural exchange between China and the West, with the translation of Christian missionaries as typical cases. In such a context, the author argues for a “non-religious” understanding and even an “atheist theology” to provide a methodological model for interdisciplinary studies of literature and religion, which not only plays an important role in comparative literature but has also been quietly exerting an impact upon the integral character of the humanities.

Keywords: *jingxue* (study of the classics/scriptures), missionaries’ translation, non-religious interpretation, atheist theology

Sharon Kim’s introduction to the workshop “Theory and Theology in Chinese Literary Studies” provided me with much inspiration. She writes, for example:

1 This article is translated by Chloë Starr and Zhang Jing, based on the presentation of the author at the workshop of “Theory and Theology in Chinese Literary Studies”, Yale University, 2016.

“One major strand of the Chinese work specifically uses theology to enable a cross-cultural dialogue between China and the West ... to allow both China and the West to preserve their own identities while allowing the other to speak on its own terms in dialogue. ... Theology provides an answer to a key question ... —how to preserve a Chinese mentality while entering into a conversation with world systems of thought... Chinese intellectuals thus describe theology as the opening through which an authentically Chinese voice can speak to the West instead of lapsing into ‘aphasia.’” Chinese scholars who are in the midst of this might not themselves come to this realization. And this sort of inspiration is precisely the attraction of cross-cultural dialogue. I believe that interdisciplinary research into literature and theology is similar. My presentation, based on the questions Kim posed, concentrates on three aspects. The first is the traditions of Chinese *jingxue* (study of the classics/scriptures), and whether these might enable interdisciplinary readings to become natural. The second is whether it was “poetry” or “the classics” that were really valued in the process of cultural exchange between China and the West. The third question is: what is the significance for us of a “non-religious Christianity” and an “atheist theology”?

I

The teaching classics of “the six arts” are often regarded as the representative works of Chinese classics and culture: that is, *The Book of Odes* (Shijing), *The Book of History* (Shangshu), *The Book of Rites* (Liji), *The Classic of Music* (Yueji), *The Yijing* (I-Ching); and *The Spring and Autumn Annals* (Chunqiu), collectively known in Chinese as the “Six Classics” (*The Classic of Music* was later lost, and these became the “Five Classics”). Scholars often concur with Ma Yifu’s comment on the classics found in his book *Speeches in Taihe* (Taihe huiyu): “It is widely acknowledged that all scholarship in our nation in over two millennia has its source in these.” The arts of the Zhou dynasty (ritual, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy and composition and mathematics) were merely the refinement of skills, or what Zhang Taiyan (a philosopher in the late Qing dynasty) called the “minor arts” (Liu 92). According to a commentary on *The Book of Rites* and on the *Zhuangzi*,² the “Six

2 *The Book of Rites*: “When you enter any state, you will know what subjects its people have been taught. If they show themselves to be gentle, sincere and good, they must have been taught from the *Book of Poetry*. If they have a wide comprehension and know of things ancient and faraway, they have been taught from *The Book of History*. If they be generous, simple and honest, they have been taught from *The Book of Music*. If they be refined, dialectic and subtle, they have been taught from *The Book of Change*. If they be generous, modest and respectful, they have been taught from *The Book of Rites and Ceremonies*. If they be rhetorical and coherent, they have been taught from *The Spring and Autumn Annals*.”

Classics” of the “Great Arts” are all rooted in human character, self-cultivation and profound thinking, and so, from the very beginning, contributed to the formation of the Dao, to education, and to the development of humanity, while the “Six Arts” or “Six Classics” added literature, history and philosophy to these three.

What is interesting is that the “Yiwenzhi” section of the *The History of the Former Han* (Hanshu) records nine types of books in the “classics/scriptures section” of the “Six Arts”: the six works given above and also *The Analects of Confucius* (Lunyu), and, in addition, *The Classic of Filial Piety* (Xiaojing) and *The Minor Learning* (Xiaoxue), the latter being essentially a textbook for learning characters. *The History of Former Han* also includes such reference texts as the *Erya* (a very early dictionary) in the “classics of filial piety” category, clearly regarding these as “scriptural/classics” (*jingxue*) materials; this is the reason why later generations included the *Erya* within the “Thirteen Classics”. When we get to the collections of the Tang, edited by Wei Zheng, the category of “Minor Learning” located within the category of “scripture/classic”, includes texts for learning characters, texts explaining the meanings of characters, and reference materials on sound, meaning and rhyme. As late as the Qing dynasty, the *Siku quanshu* (the imperial library, or “Emperor’s Four treasuries”) retained the category of “Minor Learning” in the category of “scriptures/classics”.

Assigning “Minor Learning” to the category of “Scriptures/Classics” is not just a question of library categorization, because while “Minor Learning” begins with the learning of characters, it is also preparation for the later “Great Learning” involved with reading the scriptures/classics. In Zhang Taiyan’s *Lectures on National Learning* (Guoxue jiangyanlu), he wrote, in similar vein: “In ancient times people first learnt to recognize characters, and only afterwards studied the way of the Great Learning.” From the Song dynasty onwards, “Minor Learning” gradually developed as an independent discipline, and was no longer subordinated to *jingxue*, but the original use of the “Minor Learning” in service to *jingxue* continued. This is probably similar to the study of grammar, rhetoric and logic of “Liberal Arts” in medieval Europe, where these were also intended to cultivate the abilities of the average student so that the latter could eventually approach sacred texts (Hardison 9).

Jingxue traditions were once thought of as “representing an intrinsic scholarship, broad and subtle, where everything is accounted for” (Liu 93), but the advent of modern Western scientific systems in China challenged that perception. Confucian scholars such as Qian Mu began also to suggest that: “The world of scholarship knows no national boundaries; the term ‘national studies’...will not be tenable in the future.” At the same time Qian was convinced that only by “understanding the

vicissitudes and changes in China's academic thoughts over the last two thousand years" could there be "the ability to respond to the newly- recreated opportunities" and so when arranging his thoughts for that year's lectures, he still felt "the delight of teaching, where what accumulates over a long time is not forgotten, and memories extending to the present still bring great sweetness" (Qian Mu 3-4).

China's present academic scholarship has long been westernized, but an increasing number of questions are being raised in the Chinese academic world regarding the inclusion of *The Book of Odes* in literature, or the *Zuo Commentary* (*Zuo zhuan*) in history, or the *Zhouyi* in philosophy, all in line with western classification. In terms of methods, the questions and methodologies that cohere in comparative literature, religious studies and classics probably most clearly echo the original traditions of *jingxue*. If we consider the number of "High-Level Consultation on People-to-People Exchange" (CPE) signed between China and the US, Russia, the UK, the EU, France, etc. and their related content, then all of the clues point to "*guoxue* (study of Chinese classics)" and "*hanxue*" (sinology) as the best fit for such study.

Whatever the level of "vicissitudes and changes", the historical memory of the study of the "Six Arts" is in reality everywhere, and the internal reasons for studying literature and religion together have always been natural and compelling. If we take the *Complete Tang Poems* (Quan Tangshi), for example, you will find 115 "monk poets" among them, and more than 2,800 "monastic poems", including many known to western scholarship as the "poems by the monk Han Shan". In terms of research into the relationships between literature and religion, we might first point to the Song dynasty poet Yan Yu's *Canglang's Remarks on Poetry* (*Canglang shihua*), an early 13th century poetry manual. In Yan Yu's opening piece, Buddhist terminology leaps out, in phrases such as "entering directly to the source," "going straight in with a single blade," "achieve enlightened insight" or "the gate of sudden [enlightenment]," (Yan, "Making" 394-395)³ showing how "speaking generally, the Way of Chan (Zen) is concerned only with enlightenment; the Way of poetry also lies in enlightenment," and hence "the enlightenments of poetry and Zen (禪) are very similar (论诗如论禅 Lun shi ru lun chan)" (Yan, *Canglang* 11-12).

In line with the tradition of "using Chan to speak metaphorically of poetry," research into the relation between Chinese literature and Buddhism has been continuous throughout later generations. Zhang Mantao's edited collection *Anthology of Contemporary Buddhist Research* gathered the fruits of recent representative

3 Translations taken from Stephen Owen's version of Yan Yu's Chapter I "Making the Right Distinctions in Poetry." *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*. Ed. Stephen Owen. Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1992. pp. 394-395.

research projects in the three volumes, *Buddhism and Chinese Culture*, *Buddhism and Chinese Literature*, and *Buddhist Art* (Taipei, Dacheng, 1976). Since the 1980s, scholarship on the mainland has included Zhang Zhongxing's *Buddhism and Chinese Literature* (Anhui Education Press, 1984), Ge Zhaoguang's *Zen and Chinese Culture* (Shanghai Renmin, 1986) and *Daoism and Chinese Culture* (Shanghai Renmin, 1987), Jiang Shuzhuo's *Transmission and Translation of Buddhist Scripture and Ancient Chinese Thought* (Jiangsu Renmin, 1990), *Buddhism and Chinese Literature and Arts* (Guangdong Higher Education, 1992); Zhan Shichuang's *History of Daoist Literature* (Shanghai Arts, 1992), Sun Changwu's *Buddhism and Chinese Literature* (Shanghai Renmin, 1996) and *Daoism and Tang Literature* (Renmin, 2001), Chen Yinchu's *Sui and Tang Buddhist Studies and Chinese Literature* (Baihuazhou Arts, 2002) and so on.

Since Christianity's arrival in China, whether the Assyrian Church of the Tang dynasty, the Society of Jesus of the Ming era, or the Protestant Christianity of the "Opium Wars" period, it has influenced indigenous scholarship, and the relationship between Christianity and literature has assumed an ever more important place in interdisciplinary research of religion and literature. As early as 1930, the YMCA Press in Shanghai brought out a large-scale series of works, including Wu Leichuan's *Christianity and Chinese Culture* and Xu Baoqian's *Christianity and Chinese Culture*. Included in the same series was a later work that had an enduring effect on research into literature and religion: Zhu Weizhi's *Christianity and Literature*. In the field of comparative literature, Qian Zhongshu's work has also received special attention: from 1936 when he was studying in Europe to 1998 when he died, Qian wrote 211 volumes of notes (*biji*) on foreign language literatures, dealing with more than four thousand works of literature. Religion occupied a significant place in these notes, alongside philosophy, linguistics, literature and literary theory. The first sentence Qian extracted when reading L. A. Reid's *Preface to Faith* was "What we need is not a new religion, but a renewed religion" (Qian Zhongshu 368). This was undoubtedly particularly inspiring to Chinese scholars of later generations.

Of the two threads that began here, one is related to Christianity and Chinese culture—especially research into modern Chinese literature—and the second one to reading Christianity, Western literature and literary theory from the perspective of a Chinese scholar. In 2008 the University of San Francisco and Peking University jointly organized a workshop for young scholars on "Christianity in China: Comparative Perspectives and Methods". This was probably the first time that the methodologies of comparative literature and religious studies were clearly linked together, and a question that came out of this was: why are studies of literature and

religion fated to have this sort of dialogue?

In 2000, Gayatri Spivak put forward the idea of “the death of a discipline”, and in 2003 she drew together various writings on the topic and published a book under the same title, which led to a fierce debate in the world of scholarship.⁴ As a professor of comparative literature, Spivak put forward the concept of “death of a discipline” not as an attempt to get rid of this academic subject, but in the hope that it could truly become an “international” and not just “Western” discipline. That is to say a discipline that displayed the inherent “comparative” dialectical spirit of its roots, and that reestablished the concept of “world literature”. At a broader level, this also relates to the premise of all scholarship in the humanities.

In 2014 Allen Miller (University of South Carolina) took part in a dialogue in Beijing on “The Task of Comparative Literature Today”, and gave a talk on “Wisdom as Knowledge and Wisdom as Action: Plato, Heidegger, Cicero and Confucius”. In 2015, David Damrosch of Harvard, Galin Tihanov of London University and Princeton’s Martin Kern, together with Matthias Freise of Gottingen and various other scholars took part in Beijing in a “Forum on Ideas and Methods: What Is World Literature” where the panel topics included “Frames for World Literature”, “The Location of World Literature”, “Ends and Beginnings of World Literature” and “Four Perspectives on World Literature from a Functional Point of View”. As I see it, no matter what frame or location, end or beginning, the most fundamental questions lie in the multi-dimensions of wisdom as “action” or “operation”, because “once we look beyond a single culture and era, the term ‘literature’ itself has to be defined in varied ways.” So, “world literature” is not static but dynamic, and is by nature a set of types of relation, and actually composed out of relations. This is why I very much applaud Matthias Freise’s warning: “World literature does not exist, but takes place.” This also makes me think of a quotation Alain Badiou takes from Mallarme: “Nothing took place but the place.”

From a perspective of religious studies, Max Müller’s famous dicta are often reduced to one symbolic saying: “He who knows one, knows none”. The comparative consciousness and spirit of dialogue latent in this saying lies precisely in the shared basis for existence that sustains comparative literature and religion. If this idea must extend beyond the inertia of “the center”, then it must also transcend disciplinary boundaries. Its most fundamental direction is “interfaith”, “cross-cultural”, “cross-disciplinary” or the inner implications of “mutual subjectivity”.

The essential factors latent in Chinese traditions of *jingxue* are exactly those ac-

4 Spivak, Gayatri C. *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

tivated through the interaction of comparative literature, religious studies, the classics, and even “*guoxue*” (study of the Chinese classics) and sinology.

II

In this second section of this essay, I take the history of translation of western poetry into Chinese as a case study to consider, in context of the process of China-West exchange, whether the focus of these translations has been on “*shi*” (poetry) or “*jing*” (scripture).

The translation activities of Christian missionaries represent a typical hermeneutical event in the history of China-West cultural communication, and have attracted much scholarly attention. Scholars have studied not only the translations of the Bible into Chinese and of Chinese classics into western languages, but also the translation of western literary works into Chinese by the missionaries.⁵ “Western poetry” is not “Western learning” in the ordinary sense, and translating Western poetry as a part of missionary works does not necessarily satisfy the reader’s “literary pleasure”, but the translations have to be assessed as “poetry”. This process happened at the birth of modern Chinese literature when Western poetry was introduced and being read by Chinese literati. Aside from the question of what gains or losses these Western literary works have brought to Chinese literature, they have left some obvious linguistic marks. This topic is therefore closely related to the complicated relations between literature, religion, time and tradition, which constitute a unique nexus of problems, and which might re-activate or unearth multiple elements that once were “evaporated” or “buried” (Luo 283).

A related issue is that missionaries’ translation activities under the rubric of “Chinese learning” also include translations of Chinese poetry. For instance, all three famous missionaries, that is to say, Nicolas Trigault, Alex de la Charme and Joseph de Prémare translated *The Book of Odes*.⁶ James Legge even published three versions of *The Book of Odes* (Pfister 5): an 1871 “complete version” (1st edition Hong Kong, repr. London, 1895), an 1876 “rhymed version” (London), and an 1879

5 Luo, Wenjun 罗文军. *A Study on the West Poems Translated by Christian Missionaries in Late Qing Dynasty* 晚清民初新教传教士西诗译介研究 (Wan Qing Minchu Xinjiao chuanjiaoshi xishi yijie yanjiu). Beijing: Chinese Social Sciences Press, 2016.

6 Nicolas Trigault, Alex de la Charme and Joseph de Prémare were Roman Catholic missionaries of the 16th and 17th century. James Legge was a well-known Scottish missionary in the late 19th century who later became Chair of Chinese Department at Oxford University.

“selected religious poems” (for his series *Sacred Books of the East*).⁷ James Legge’s versions remain problematic because he did not care whether his translation were done in the form of poetry or not. Although he discusses in detail meter, rhyme and tone patterns in the Chinese language (Legge, *Chinese* 102-111), and expresses his hope that one day someone might present “a faithful metrical version”, he still holds that it is “not worth the trouble of versifying” (Legge, *Chinese* 116). Legge explains that the reason he translates *The Book of Odes* is because it is one of the Chinese classics, and he is not interested in judging its “poetical value”. Earlier missionaries had introduced Chinese literature to Europe and praised *The Book of Odes* as something “beautiful, harmonious, sublime and pure”, which Legge thought was not only “absurdly extravagant” but that also displayed “astonishing audacity” (Legge, *Chinese* 114-115). As for this, Legge is the representative of many other later missionaries. Our question is: did their primary interests and reasons for translating *The Book of Odes* lie in it being “*shi*” (poetry) or in it being “*jing*” (scripture)?

In other words, if what the missionaries who translated *The Book of Odes* first looked at was not just the “poetry”, then were the missionaries who translated western poetry into Chinese destined to face the same choices? To take this a step further: if there has been a similar tradition of “poetic education” in China and the West, or if the principle of “education through entertainment” (Horace 42-44) is similar to that which holds that “the essence of poetry is gentleness and kindness” described in *The Book of Rites*, and if the “healing and purifying power of music” (Aristotle 285) is also akin to the phrase “as customs change and traditions evolve, nothing is better than music,”⁸ then, for the missionaries at least, was the purpose of “*jiao*” (education) definitely superior to that of “*shi*” (poetry)? If we follow this train of thought, then perhaps it is easy to understand the initial purpose of the missionaries in translating *The Book of Odes*, however, we still have to face the following questions: why was *The Book of Odes* regarded by Westerners as one of the Sacred Books? And yet why was the Song of Solomon regarded by Chinese primarily as a literary work (Luo 279-281)?⁹ If even the “Songs of Songs”¹⁰ is treated as a literary

7 See Max Muller edited, *The Sacred Books of the East*, Vol.3. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1879, which included some “religious texts” in Chinese classics and was entitled “The Sacred Books of China”.

8 Zengzi 曾子, “Chapter 20: Broad and Crucial Doctrine,” in *The Classic of Filial Piety* (Xiaojing).

9 See Luo, Wenjun 罗文军. *A Study on the West Poems Translated by Christian Missionaries in Late Qing Dynasty* 晚清民初新教传教士西诗译介研究 (Wan Qing Minchu Xinjiao chuanjiaoshi xishi yijie yanjiu). Beijing: Chinese Social Sciences Press. 2016, pp. 279-281.

10 *The Song of Songs*, which is Solomon’s, see Newly-revised Standard Version.Chinese Protestant Council, 2002, p. 1062.

work, then what of other Western poetry?

There is no doubt that for missionaries, culture was a necessary supplement to their evangelical purpose, and this is quite obvious in their translation activities. For example, James Legge states clearly that: “In order to bring our Chinese readers and hearers to think as we do about God, missionaries must supplement largely the statements in the Confucian books about Him ... we have to supplement the testimony concerning Him in *The Old Testament*. But is there one of ourselves who has not from year to year been adding, by various study and effort of thought, to his knowledge of God, enlarging to himself the meaning of the name?” (*Confucianism* 3) This strategy, in fact, worked well. In Legge’s translation of *The Book of Odes*, when the two characters “*Shang di* 上帝” appeared in one poem, he chose the word “God” to translate the term: “This king Wan, watchfully and reverently, with his entire intelligence served God.” In other places where the character “*ming* 命” appears, Legge translated this as “the appointment of God” (*Chinese* 433, 427). Because of such translations and interventions, in current Chinese language the word “*Shang di* 上帝 [Lord on High]” is regarded as a Western concept, and few recall its roots in the ancient Chinese classics.

However, the Church (as well missionaries themselves) has been suspicious and cautious about this kind of “evangelizing through culture” (intercultural evangelism). While Elijah Coleman Bridgman complained about the mission society’s supervision of the *China Repository*, the magazine he founded (Luo 253),¹¹ it was he who criticized the Delegates Version of the Bible for “sacrificing the correct translation in many places” and “having few insights in accordance with Christian doctrines” because it used “Chinese philosophical terms” (Zhao 21). Because James Legge “spent too much time translating Chinese classics,” his colleagues suspected him of “not serving God well” (Pfister 3). An even more extreme example can be seen in the strength of the evangelical and missionary purpose of these missionaries, with some church universities even foregoing courses in English in order to resist secular western ideas, while others forbade the use of Chinese in order to overcome the powerful Chinese traditional customs. The results of such efforts were the same: student stroke in both universities (Corbett 76; Xu Yihua 28).

Similar paradoxes are plentiful. For instance, Wang Tao’s contribution to missionary translation works has been widely affirmed, but his own descriptions of his works contradict the impressions of others: “Every day I start working in the early

11 See Luo, Wenjun 罗文军. *A Study on the West Poems Translated by Christian Missionaries in Late Qing Dynasty* 晚清民初新教传教士西诗译介研究(Wan Qing Minchu Xinjiao chuanjiaoshi xishi yijie yanjiu). Beijing: Chinese Social Sciences Press. 2016, p. 253.

dawn and finish after the sun sets, working as hard as a street vendor. My status is as low as a hired worker pounding rice day and night. By nature I am lazy and dislike constraints, but now I am living among the stone animals [which represent laws and regulations]. The writings I read all day are in conflict with each other, like ice and fire, and impossible to reconcile. To all appearances I am the one who writes, but in fact, I am used by others, and what I have written are but broken sentences, of limited vision. So my writings can be used to paste up windows or just thrown into the toilet” (Wang xxx)¹². The American scholar Michael Gibbs Hill quotes Wang Tao in a book discussing the translations of the famous modern translator Lin Shu, explaining that Wang Tao was regarded by his colleagues as “a man who had forfeited the self-respect of a scholar for the sake of regular wages.” As Wang Tao wrote, “relying on the barbarian pygmies for a living is ... like being in prison,” and as for the paper on which his work was written, if “not used for covering pickle jars or pasting up windows, one might as well throw it straight into the privy” (Hill 28). Hill notes that it was Joseph Jardine, a wealthy opium trader, who paid for Wang Tao’s printing costs, and for this reason, “Twenty-first-century readers might also find his labors suspicious” (Hill 28).

Whenever we encounter intercultural translation activities, it is common to find paradoxes in investigating the motivation, methods, results, or the role of “ideology” or of patrons in regards to the translation. Hill’s book title serves as a good example—*Lin Shu, Inc., Translation and the Making of Modern Chinese Culture*, in which “Lin Shu, Inc.” can be translated into Chinese as “the workshop of Lin Shu” or as “Lin’s Store”, a version more familiar to ordinary Chinese people because of a famous movie “*Lin’s Store* 林家铺子 (Lin jia pu zi)” in 1960s. “*Puzi* 铺子” (store) is not wrong, but the reason why we could not choose this term may be precisely because the term is too “appropriate” or too Chinese, and so easily swallowed up by the “presuppositions” of the “target culture”. This kind of issue is very obvious in the case of Western poetry translated by Westerners. In straightforward terms, “the translation and introduction of western poems by western missionaries” brings out a series of paradoxical motifs: that Western translators, whose mission was to spread the Gospel, were motivated by educational aims, under the supervision of their mission societies and various kinds of sponsorship, and translated selected Western poems into Chinese, which were then ultimately integrated into Chinese religious

12 Wang Tao 王韬. *Private Writings*, see Cai Jintu 蔡锦图 edited, *Selected Works of Christian Writings in Late Qing Dynasty* 遗珠拾穗：清末民初基督教圣经选辑 (Yizhu shisui: Qingmo Minchu Jidujiao Shengjing xuanji). Xinbei: Chinese Oliver Press, 2014, note 38 on p. xxx.

life or literary history through the secondary selection of readers. There is no single constitutive factor in this process, instead all have become “constituted results” (Badiou 37)¹³.

In Western philosophy there is a famous dictum by Aristotle: “even in mere melodies, there is an imitation of character” (Aristotle 280), and because of this “the Republic” should design a kind of “meter and melody” for the “guardian of the state” (Plato 365-366), which is similar to the Confucian saying, “Banish the songs of Zheng [because they are decadent], and keep far from specious talkers.”¹⁴ In this regard, even if the missionaries’ translations of Western poetry are merely accepted or understood by readers as “poetry” in the literary sense, the basis for this understanding still lies in the conceptual and formal function of “poetry”, and not in pure enjoyment. And even if the history of missionaries as the subject of the translation is unlikely to be repeated, they have highlighted a historical period when the two cultures enjoyed exceptional interactions; this may well come to serve as a unique inspiration for research into “translated literature”.

According to a theologian Gerhard Ebeling, the New Testament’s canonicity “requires its unity,” but it is always “an unfinished book” (Ebeling 23-28). Translation as the text as well as the activity of comprehension and interpretation tied to the translation process might be the same: Dao Yuan, who came to China in the Song dynasty and tried to learn the dharma, wrote a book entitled *The Very Dharma* (Zhengfa yancang), whose meaning became much clearer and comprehensible when it was later translated back into Chinese.¹⁵ American sinologist Haun Saussy also notices an incomplete intercultural “fusion” in his study on Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound. He points out how Fenollosa’s essay has been re-edited and expanded, and how this unfinished essay of Fenollosa itself cannot “be finished in one single language” (Saussy 40). Does this mean that the subsequent journey to search for the meaning has to go back to the original language itself? If not, is it true, as T. S. Eliot claims, to say that, “The Chinese poetry we know is nothing but what Ezra Pound has invented?” (Saussy front flyleaf)

The original purpose and target of the missionaries’ effort in translating poetry lay outside “poetry”, but when translating the Bible into Chinese became the dominant trend, why did these missionaries still go on to “translate poetry” in this King-

13 Alain Badiou: “the subject always being constituted, ... not constitutive”. Badiou, Alain. “The Event in Deleuze”. Tr. Jon Roffe. *Parrhesia*, no. 2 (2007): 37.

14 Confucius, *Analects*, chapter 10.

15 Dao Yuan 道元. *The Very Dharma* 正法眼藏 (Zhengfa yancang). Tr. He Yansheng何燕生. Beijing: Religious Culture Press, 2003.

dom of Poetry? Have the Western poems translated by them left some “constitutive” possibilities in the shape of forms and ideas? How are we going to evaluate these changed texts and the context that has changed the texts? Here we may achieve some deeper understanding about the reason why translation studies must touch upon—and be involved in—fundamental hermeneutical questions.

III

One intriguing and maybe also controversial topic is the assertion of the contemporary Italian thinker Gianni Vattimo that “perhaps true Christianity must be nonreligious” (Vattimo, “Toward” 37). If a “nonreligious Christianity” is a possibility, then perhaps there can also be an “atheist theology”—and indeed “atheist theology” has already been the subject of much research (Boscaljon 1-14)¹⁶. Is this simply some paradox, or post-modern rhetoric of contemporary intellectuals, or some sort of mysterious word play?

If we trace the source of such thinking, we find that phrases like “nonreligious interpretation of Christianity”, “nonreligious interpretation of biblical concepts”, etc. (Bonhoeffer 344), were originally used by the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and so were not criticisms originating from outside the Christian community at all. In his book *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith discusses how religion is not equivalent to faith; and if you want to distinguish “faith” from “the cumulative religious traditions” (Smith, *The Meaning* 154),¹⁷ then “faith” is precisely “non-religious”. If the faith of Christians is not one of the religions in the world, then “neither is the faith of any other people” (Smith, *The Meaning* 139).

As Smith mentions, the word “*religio*” occurs 9 times in the Vulgate Old Testament and carries varied meanings, including “service or ceremony” (Ex. 12:26), “ordinance” (Ex. 12:43), “statute” (Lev. 6:31) and “requirement” (Num. 19:2). The related term “*religiositas*” occurs 3 times, in Ecclesiastes 1:17, 18 and 26, translated into English as “religiousness” or “godliness” (Smith, *The Meaning* 210). In John Hick’s foreword to the 1991 version of Cantwell Smith’s book, he sums up the mat-

16 Boscaljon, Daniel R. “Žižek’s Atheist Theology.” *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, 4 (2010):1-14.

17 Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1991), p. 154. In Smith’s words, “By ‘cumulative tradition’ I mean the entire mass of overt objective data that constitute the historical deposit, as it were, of the past religious life of the community in question: temples, scriptures, theological systems, dance patterns, legal and other social institutions, conventions, moral codes, myths, and so on; anything that can be and is transmitted from one person, one generation, to another, and that an historian can observe”. (156).

ter: “Nor within the European tradition did the Latin word *religio* mean a religion in our modern sense. The title of St. Augustine’s *De Vera Religione* should not be translated as *On the True Religion* (i.e., Christianity in contrast to other religions), but as *On True Religiousness* or *True Piety*. This was still true a thousand years later, when Zwingli wrote his *De Vera et Falsa Religione*: the subject was not Christianity as the true religion in contrast to false religions, but rather the true or false religio, i.e., ‘piety’ of Christians” (Hick vii).

The nuanced differences of these words cannot help but remind us of Derrida’s question: “[W]hat if *religio* remained untranslatable?” Derrida further points out that “As its name indicates, it would be necessary, therefore, one would be tempted to conclude, to speak of this essence with a sort of religio-sity. In order not to introduce anything alien, leaving it thus intact, safe, unscathed.” And that is “the very matter – the thing itself – of religion” (Derrida 67, 61)¹⁸. Thus, from “*religio*” to the “very matter-the thing itself-of religion”, there exists a process of dynamic generation of semantic meaning, which occurs not only in Western languages, but also in Chinese. The term “*zongjiao* 宗教” (religion) and “*shenxue* 神学” (theology) share a similarly complicated process of emergence. It is worth to investigate this process and to see how the current meanings of these terms were finally settled.

In ancient Chinese, “*zong* 宗” refers to the origin or root inscribed in the ancestral shrine, and “*jiao* 教” refers to that which elders and teachers instruct and which children should follow (Xu Shen 127, 342). It was only in the modern period that the two characters were joined together. In classical Buddhist scriptures, we find frequent use of the terms. For example, in the North Song, Buddhist Master Qi Song said: “We should make Zen the origin (*zong* 宗), and Buddha the ancestor (*zu* 祖). The ancestor (*zu* 祖) is the great pattern for the teaching (*jiao* 教) while the origin (*zong* 宗) is the fundamental system of the teaching.”¹⁹ Reading further, we are told that the “way of education” focusing on “transmitting from mind to mind instead of the transmission of mere doctrinal teachings” is the most profound mystery and se-

18 Derrida, Jacques. *Acts of Religion*. Ed. Gil Anidjar. New York: Routledge, 2002, pp. 67,61. Emphasis in the original. He also says, “One must in any case take into account, if possible in an areligious, or even irreligious manner, what religion at present might *be*, as well as what is *said* and *done*, what is *happening* at this very moment, in the world, in history, *in its name*.” (61)

19 Qi Song. “Chuanfa zhengzong ji: shanghuang dishu,” in *Chinese Electronic Taisho Tripitaka*, Vol. 51, Normalized Version, No. 2078, Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association. http://www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T51/2078_001.htm

cret of orthodox Zen doctrine.²⁰ Other scholars have noticed that when Yan Fu translated Adam Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* into Chinese, he borrowed from Buddhism the term “*jiaozong* 教宗”, whose semantic meaning should be “the origin of education” (*Jiao zhi suo zong* 教之所宗) in the context of “*zong* as the fundamental system of education” (Masini 73). As Yan Shou of the Five Dynasties (907-960) wrote, “If you have heard of the treasures of Tathagata, and spent all of your life chanting and transmitting them, meditating day and night without wearying, however, your own eyes are not opened, you are merely counting outer treasures; if your eyes of wisdom are not developed, how can you dispute the origin of doctrine (教宗)?”²¹ In this context, “*zong* 宗” means “revered” and “acknowledged as ruler and honored”.²² The sense of “reverence” in “*zong*宗,” as in the phrase “*Jun zhi zong zhi* 君之宗之” and of “education” in “*jiao*教”, as in “the sages laid down their education in the way of Heaven” (*shen dao she jiao* 神道设教)²³ were very far from their later meaning within the compound term “*zongjiao*宗教” (religion).

The changes following the introduction of Western ideas and science and technology into China left a strong imprint on the modern Chinese language. According to records, 129 Chinese books were translated into Japanese between 1660-1895, with only 12 books translated from Japanese into Chinese, while between 1896 and 1911 the situation was completely reversed, with 958 books translated into Chinese from Japanese. (Masini 127-128) New terms appeared for “Japanese-made Chinese” (*Wasei-kango* 和制汉语), with much new Chinese vocabulary “borrowed-back from

20 Qi Song. “Chuanfa zhengzong lun: juan xia,” in *Chinese Electronic Taisho Tripitaka*, Vol. 51, Normalized Version, No. 2080, Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association. http://www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T51/2080_002.htm.

21 Yan, Shou. “Zongjing juanlu: book 43,” in *Chinese Electronic Taisho Tripitaka*, Vol. 48, Normalized Version, No. 2016, Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association. http://www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T48/2016_043.htm.

22 “*Jun zhi zong zhi*, 君之宗之”, in the poem “Gong Liu 公刘”, in “Greater odes of the kingdom: decade of sheng min”, Tr. James Legge, in *The Book of Poetry*, vol. IV of *The Chinese Classics: with a Translation, Critical and Exegetical Notes, Prolegomena, and Copious Indexes*, vol. IV. London: Trübner, 1961, p. 487. See also “*Ji yan yu zong* 既燕于宗” (The feast is spread in the ancestral temple) in poem “*Fu yi* 鳧鷖” (“Greater odes of the kingdom: decade of sheng min,” 480); or as said in the interpretation of poem “*Fu yi*”: “Lai zong ju zun wei ye 来宗居尊位也,” to be put at the most reverend position. See Li Chu and Huang Xun, *Mao shi ji jie*, <http://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&file=10743&page=161&remap=gb>.)

23 “Tuan: When we contemplate the spirit-like way of Heaven, we see how the four season proceed without error. The sages, in accordance with (this) spirit-like way laid down their instructions, and all under heaven yield submission to them.” See “Guangua” (no. 20), of “*Zhouyi zheng yi: shangjing*.”

Japanese” or “borrowed directly from Japanese”. Long before Yan Fu borrowed the term “*jiaozong* 教宗” from Buddhism, Huang Zunxian had adopted the Japanese term in his 1887 translation *Annals of Japan*, using “*zongjiao* 宗教” (shukyō, religion). In 1896 when Liang Qichao published a series of articles entitled *On Reform* (Bian fa tong yi 变法通义), the term “*zongjiao* 宗教” was also used (Masini 119-120).

The history of China’s exchanges with the outside world and relative power and status changes provokes a range of responses and emotions now, and perhaps the fate of Chinese terms like “*zongjiao* 宗教” is just like that of “*religio*” in the west: we cannot ignore the “cumulative traditions” embedded in the term. For the literary leaders of the 1900s, it seemed entirely appropriate to borrow terms from Chinese translations of Western works. For example, when Kang Youwei wrote the preface to his book *Catalog of Japanese Books* (Riben shumu zhi), he wryly ridiculed the debates over the borrowed terms: “The cream of Western books of learning has been mostly translated by the Japanese. I make use of their success: I treat the West as the ox, Japan as the peasant, and I am the one who sits and eats... all of the most important books have been collected for me” (Masini 126).

Given that the meaning of the term “religion” has been so complicated in both Chinese and Western history, what it connotes has long gone beyond debates of absolute “true or false”. In Hick’s analysis, “some of those definitions include Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism among the religions, while others exclude one or more of these. Some definitions regard Marxism and Maoism as religions, while others do not.” Therefore, “there are not only no religions as contraposed socio-theological entities, but also no religion as a definable essence” (Hick ix). This is why the Westerners often feel confused at the notion of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism as being three religions in one (*san jiao he yi* 三教合一), and fail to recognize that the Chinese do not perceive these three religions as alternatives but “something more analogous to three interpenetrating fields of force within the continuous religious life” (Hick viii). By a similar token, a born rebel like Derrida is taken as writing about “Religion without religion” by the more radical “post-modern theologians.”²⁴

Having analyzed “religion” in detail, we can be assured that the term “theology” (*shenxue* 神学) has as least as much to deliberate over, as seen in Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s book *Towards a World Theology*,²⁵ echoing Gianni Vattimo’s article “Towards

24 Caputo, John D. *The Prayer and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.

25 Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *Towards a World Theology*. London: Macmillan, 1981.

a Nonreligious Christianity”, or in Slavoj Žižek’s article “Towards a Materialist Theology” (Žižek 19-26).²⁶ At a more radical level, Žižek not only deploys a range of argumentation for his “perverse theology” (Yang 781-798),²⁷ but even argues, on the basis of Jesus’ last prayer on the cross— “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34) and his close reading of theologian G. K. Chesterton, that Christianity is the only religion in the world “in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist” (Chesterton 145). Australian scholar Roland Boer has extended this a step further, arguing that atheists or Marxist scholars should write about theology (Boer, “Towards” 175-202), and publishing a series of books on “Marxism and theology” which connect together the ideas of some of the most active contemporary thinkers, including Fredric Jameson, Julia Kristeva, Alain Badiou, and Giorgio Agamben.²⁸

How can we talk about Christianity and its theology from a “nonreligious” or “atheist” perspective? Agamben’s book *The Time that Remains*²⁹ might serve as a good model for this. In comparing verses in Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth) with 1 Corinthians, Agamben notes a considerable discrepancy in the descriptions, and uses these to comment on the Christian term vocation, or calling (*klēsis*). Ecclesiastes stresses “a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; . . . a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; . . . a time for war, and a time for peace” (Eccl.3:4-8), while in *1 Corinthians*, St. Paul told his community that “from now on, let even those who have wives to be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it” (1 Cor. 7:29-31). In other words, “*Qoheleth* clearly separates the time Paul melds together” (Agamben 25-26). Potentially, a “nonreligious” sense and an “atheist” reading could be hidden between the lines in this comparison. For Agamben, “those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not,” inspires a form and logic of the “as not” (*hōs mē*), which is Agamben’s focus. The “as if and

26 Žižek, Slavoj. “Towards a Materialist Theology.” *Angelaki Journal of Theoretical Humanities*. 12, 1(2007):19-26.

27 The “Perverse Theology”, in my reading of Žižek, is to express theology through a “non-theological” proposition. For more discussions about this, please see Yang Huilin, “To Reverse our Premise with the Perverse Core: A Response to Žižek’s ‘Theology’ in Chinese Context”. *Positions: East Asian Cultures Critique*, 19, 3 (2011):781-798.

28 Boer, Roland. *Criticism of Heaven: on Marxism and Theology I*. Leiden: Brill, 2007; *Criticism of Religion: on Marxism and Theology II*. Leiden: Brill, 2009.

29 Agamben, Giorgio. *The Time that Remains: a Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*. Tr. Patricia daily. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.

yet as not” “from now on” negates our original identity of “possessing” (those who have wives are to be as if they had none) while a new subject is “created”. On the other hand, the newly created subject does not bear any new “identity” as such but is only created in the “relationship” formed by “being called” and “calling” (*klēsis*).

For this reason Agamben reminds us to read 1 Corinthians 7:21 closely: “For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ.” Here the “slave” and “freed person” are both “as if and yet as not.” As he says, “Paul uses a peculiar expression that gave his interpreters much to ponder: *chresai*, ‘make use’. ... this is the definition Paul gives to messianic life in the form of the ‘as not’. To live messianically means ‘to use’ *klēsis*; conversely, messianic *klēsis* is something to use, not to possess. ... The expropriation of each and every juridical-factual property ... under the form of the *as not* ... does not ... found a new identity; the ‘new creature’ is none other than the use and messianic vocation of the old” (Agamben 26-27)³⁰.

Compared to traditional interpretation, we have to admit that Agamben’s reading of Paul and the New Testament passage differs greatly. Yet submerged in the confessional language are some insights that might be recovered and reactivated by this way of reading, just as when Alain Badiou was deeply attracted by “evental forms”, theological topics like “person”, “gift”, “eros” or “body” were given new interpretations. If “the crises, breakthrough and paradoxes of mathematics, the quaking of poetic language, the revolution and provocations of inventive politics, the wavering of the relation between the two sexes” can stimulate “instituted and consolidated knowledge” and manifest as a typical “correlated structure”, then might it possible for seemingly traditional theological topics to incorporate a “correlated existence” inspired by “calling”? In this way, the similar problematic consciousness of “correlation” might succeed in becoming a common direction for disparate thinkers.

Coincidentally, both Badiou and Žižek have considered the “image of Christian Orthodoxy” established by the Apostle Paul, but their real interest lies in the transition between “calling” and “response”, which in their view constitutes the form for a “truth-procedure” (Žižek 9, 173). They each evidently treat Christianity as a set of prototypical narratives, with Žižek even tracing the secular rhetoric of “historical processes” or “the law of the market” back to this archetype. In this way, analyzing the myths of faith is similar to analyzing the myths of history; revealing the struc-

30 Agamben, Giorgio. *The Time that Remains*, p. 26-27. Compare Agamben’s reading with 2 Corinthians 5:17: “So if anyone is in the Messiah, the new creature; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.”

ture of faith is the same as revealing the structure of all “truth narratives”. In the end, the core lies in questioning the “constitutive subject” and the “emergence” of the “constituted” one, just as Agamben’s “new creature” “uses”, rather than “possesses” its identity. In this context, we can understand Vattimo’s assertion: “the thing that is most decisive in the event of Christianity is precisely this attention toward subjectivity” (Vattimo, “Toward” 32).

Vattimo repeatedly refers to “weak thought”, echoing an expression found in the writings of Meister Eckhart and many others, whose root is similar to that which Francis Schüssler Fiorenza sees in the writings of Jürgen Habermas, where the “monological subject” is replaced by “a community of subjects” (Fiorenza 4-5). This is in keeping with, and extends, Vattimo’s other works such as *Hermeneutic Communism*,³¹ which interpret Christianity from a Marxist perspective. Žižek praised the book highly when it was published: “‘weak thought’ does not mean weak action but rather is the very resort of strong radical change. This is a book that everyone who thinks about radical politics needs like the air he or she breathes!”³²

For Vattimo, “Nonreligious” Christianity is a complementary proposition, and “weak thought” can recover the essence of Christianity: charity. On the other hand, Vattimo frequently quotes a saying of Benedetto Croce: “We cannot help calling ourselves Christians,” and goes further to claim that “we cannot even speak but from a Christian point of view.” This comes from a sense that Westerners are “fundamentally incapable of articulating a discourse” without accepting certain culturally conditioned premises (Vattimo, “Toward” 36). The premise can fit any context, and “Christian” can be replaced by any other cultural identity, summed up in his phrase “What makes your house a home is the artificial order you establish” (Vattimo, “Toward” 40).

On the other hand, for Vattimo, “a Christian point of view” does not necessarily mean Christian values, and the relation between identity propositions and the results are far more complicated than we can imagine. Here, Vattimo uses Voltaire as an example, since Voltaire “demanded freedom against authoritarianism”, at a time when authority was the Jesuits, and so attacked Christianity on these grounds. This kind of “standing unconditionally for freedom and against authoritarianism” is precisely what Vattimo defines as Christian values. If what Voltaire fought against was nothing but an empty “identity”, this “being against” was fundamentally a “standing for” Christianity, judged purely from the perspective of value ideals. For this rea-

31 Vattimo, Gianni and Santiago Zabala. *Hermeneutic Communism: from Heidegger to Marx*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

32 *Ibid*, see Žižek’s blurb on the back cover of the hardcover edition.

son, Vattimo believes “Voltaire was a good Christian” (Vattimo, “Toward” 37).

Vattimo also contests, via Wilhelm Dilthey, that the most important spiritual legacy of Christianity lies in the fact that “Christianity accomplished the first attack against metaphysics construed exclusively as objectivity” (Vattimo, “Toward” 31). In this sense, “everything else associated with the tradition and truth of Christianity is dispensable and may rightfully be called mythology” (Vattimo, “Toward” 41).

Vattimo’s contempt for a “dispensable” “mythology” also has its theological root as well. Rudolf Bultmann spoke of “demythologization”, while Reinhold Niebuhr’s wording was even sharper: The Orthodox churches ... try “vainly to meet the social perplexities of a complex civilization with irrelevant precepts, deriving their authority from their – sometimes quite fortuitous – inclusion in a sacred canon. It concerns itself with the violation of Sabbatarian prohibitions or puritanical precepts, and insists, figuratively, on tithing ‘mint, anise, and cumin’” (Niebuhr 2). Such radical attitudes were seemingly not regarded as heretical by other theologians; in criticizing Bultmann, for instance, Bonhoeffer argued that he “went not ‘too far’ as most people thought, but rather not far enough.” If we continue in this vein, we may find Bonhoeffer’s own contribution: “You cannot separate God from the miracles (as Bultmann thinks); instead, you must be able to interpret and proclaim them both ‘nonreligiously’” (Bonhoeffer 285).

The reason why Voltaire’s “standing against” could be regarded by Vattimo as a “standing for” is probably related to Derrida’s argument to “think about religion abstractly” or “to place quotation marks around this word in order to abstract and extract it from its origins. And thereby to announce, ... a possibility that would not be solely Christian” (Derrida 43, 59). This abstraction is directed against that which Vattimo criticized, namely “construing metaphysics as exclusively objectivity,” since only when we are able to “think about religion abstractly,” can fundamentalist ideas, in any form, be replaced. Here, the strange relationship between metaphysics and fundamentalism led Vattimo to claim that “although not all metaphysics have been violent, I would say that all violent people ... have been metaphysical” (Vattimo, “Toward” 43).

According to Bultmann’s “demythologization” theory, the reflections of Derrida and Vattimo can be summarized as a kind of “disobjectivation” or “de-sacralization”. In Badiou’s words, this causes ideas to be legitimately expressed in “the most naked way” - that is, “truth has no object” (Badiou 9)³³. Is this nihilism? On the contrary, it is quite the opposite.

33 Alain Badiou. *Manifesto for Philosophy*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992, p. 9.

Badiou believes that the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* has exposed how “capital is the general dissolvent of sacralizing representations” but that “philosophy has not known until recently how to think in level terms with Capital.” If we treat the “objectification of causality” and its organic relations as the sacred universal “Order”, then “desacralization” is a necessary condition for ideas to come close to existence and truth. Thus, “for Karl Marx and us, desacralization is not nihilistic at all,” because it demands us to “face meaning in an age of no meaning and disorientation” (Badiou 56, 58, 74).

The ultimate purpose for “nonreligious” Christianity and “atheist” theology is to “get rid of one’s self-centeredness” (*po zhi*破执). The reason why the dialectic thinking of a “nonreligious” and “atheist” approach cannot be separated completely from religion and theology lies in the fact that pure “performativity” finds its most direct illustration in the “calling in prayer”. Derrida, referring to Aristotle, says that “calling” is a “performative” fact that is “neither true nor false” (Derrida 46). The grounds for this fact rely not on the “pre-assurance” of a “subject of faith” regarding a judgment on truth or falsity, but in the process of action itself. This brings us back to the “emergence” and “semantic meaning” of the noun “religion” (Derrida 48).

Qi Song, the monk mentioned above, once penned a Buddhist chant: “The Ultimate Truth itself has no name. The name only serves to reveal the Ultimate Truth. The one who receives the true dharma, will realize that it is neither real nor unreal.”³⁴ The idea probably echoes with Aristotle’s “neither true nor false” with some connection to natal or postnatal. In any case, there is a common principle at work in Chinese and Western philosophical thinking, and Chinese people have faced the same questions as Westerners, as expressed in Professor Fang Litian’s maxim: “Buddhism is in fact an atheist religion.”

To take such thinking a step further, we might say that when “theology” is pushed to the extreme, it must almost certainly connote the “atheism” described by some institutionalized believers. If this is the so-called “Post-modern Theology”, then its insights and inspirations are not jokes or throw-away remarks at all. The pity is that we have not yet learnt to think in this way.

Research starting from this point cannot just result in a common understanding of comparative literature, comparative culture, or comparative religion, but must point towards the reconstruction of “discourse” itself. If contemporary humanities

34 Qi Song. “Chuanfa zhengzong ji: Buddhmitra, of northern India, the ninth patriarch.” in *Chinese Electronic Taisho Tripitaka*, Vol. 51, No. 2078, normalized version. Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association, http://www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T51/2078_002.htm. 12. Aug, 2018.

do aim to challenge discourses of power and pre-assured truth systems, including the search for assured meaning after the traditional “certainty” was shattered, then this is the most important inspiration that the interdisciplinary study of literature and religion can offer.

Concerning the significance or contribution of Western learning to Chinese intellectuals, genuine understanding and interpretation of Western learning must go beyond the details and investigate cause and reason, trying to detach from a Western discursive pattern. In this way, the cultural distance between us and “alterity” can become a unique perspective and accelerate particular questions. In this way, the Western learning in Chinese context can truly be productive, and China can offer valuable response to the West. In my view, Chinese academia has now paid attention to, and also expanded, the interdisciplinary study of literature and religion, and may be able to accomplish this goal in three aspects: 1) To discover the unique resources for comparative studies through “Scriptural Reasoning” and by studying the missionaries’ translation of Western and Chinese classics; 2) To describe a historical trajectory of interdisciplinary studies through studying the Chinese traditional commentary and annotation methods and comparing it with the Western hermeneutical methods, which connects literature and religion innately; 3) To provide a methodological example for interdisciplinary studies of literature and religion by referring to the religious dimension that has always been hidden within Western humanities studies. Such kind of research not only plays an important role in comparative literature studies but has also quietly exerted an impact upon the integral character of Chinese humanities studies.

If we understand the interdisciplinary studies of literature and religion as discussed above, what Derrida has quoted from Heidegger is worth our attention: “Poets, when they are in their being, are prophetic. But they are not ‘prophets’... We should not... distort Holderlin’s poem: ... ‘His dream ... is divine, but it does not dream a god’” (Quoted in Derrida 54). A God as such can only be “present-absent”, and the “present-absent” God is “absent in place” (Derrida 65). When comparative studies on literature and religion serve to mutually inspire and spur into action different Chinese intellectuals, and when the combination of the two disciplines can dissolve the self-closing, self-interpretation and “pre-assurance” (Derrida 44) of the field, the inspiration and enlightenment contained within these studies might become the fundamental mark of the value of humanities studies.

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