

Western Civilization with Chinese Comparisons, 3rd edition

JOHN G. BLAIR AND JERUSHA HULL MCCORMACK
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635 PAGES WITH CD-ROM

Reviewed by Jeffrey L. Richey

Since ancient times, the peoples of what are now known as China and the West have gazed at one another across vast distances of culture and geography with intense interest, occasional enmity, and no small amount of exoticism. Han dynasty scholars wrote with wonder of the land of Daqin (Roman Syria), where seemingly every Chinese custom was turned upside down. The rulers of Daqin minted silver rather than bronze coins. The coins were solid with no square cavity in the center. They had images and inscriptions in realms so far west that Chinese scholars regarded them in terms of extreme contrast with their own land. Either China was presented as an ideal Confucian meritocracy, in which emperors were selected for their moral worth and were dismissed once calamities cast doubt on their eligibility to rule, or as a romantic paradise over which the Daoist goddess, the Queen Mother of the West (*Xiwangmu*), presided. Similarly, European thinkers digested Christian missionaries' accounts of *serica*—the Latin name for China, “the land of silk”—possibly derived from the Chinese term for silk, *si*). They then produced both exalted portraits of that far-away country, where either natural religion, not scriptural revelation, and social tranquility, not civil and religious warfare, prevailed—as in the accounts of

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) and Voltaire (1694–1778). Westerners also produced images of a China ruled by cruel tyrants and superstition or as an overpopulated “machine-civilization,” as in Jack London’s short story of 1914, “The Unparalleled Invasion.”

Altogether, these Occidental and Orientalist “sightings” (to use eminent historian of China, Jonathan Spence’s, phrase) of each other’s culture pose formidable obstacles to anyone seeking an accurate and balanced comparative understanding of Chinese and Western civilizations. It is precisely this kind of myopia that John G. Blair and Jerusha Hull McCormack’s *Western Civilization with Chinese Comparisons*, now in its third edition and accompanied by a CD-ROM, seeks to remedy by focusing clearly on what primary sources in English translation reveal about historical cultural norms, both traditional and modern, in China and the West. The authors state that their goal is “to radically simplify the study of these two civilizations” by highlighting “characteristically Western” cultural elements in relation to “characteristically Chinese” elements through examples drawn from both texts and images. Specifically, the volume is aimed at those who wish to discern “thought patterns” that are older and deeper than “the relatively superficial transformations that are currently taking place in both civilizations.”

Accordingly, Blair and McCormack acquaint readers with their volume in a ten-page introduction that lays the conceptual groundwork for the comparative study of China and the West. This section includes many pedagogically valuable components, such as the contrasts between ethnocentric maps of the world typically used in Chinese, Russian, and US classrooms, as well as rather more abstract and perhaps less-useful discussions of comparative Chinese, English, and Latin syntax. They then present excerpts from traditional and modern Chinese and Western texts organized in terms of enduring human concerns such as kinship, education, and politics. Although images (duplicated in full color on the companion CD-ROM) appear in each section, they are most effectively incorporated in the “Defining Humans” and “Humans and Their Surroundings” sections. The “Defining Humans” and “Humans and Their Surroundings” sections incorporate images into the volume’s primarily textual approach more effectively than other sections, and teachers who adopt the volume for classroom use will benefit from the full-color illustrations provided on the companion CD-ROM.

Blair and McCormack structure their anthology of Chinese and Western sources using the fourteen-week semester model, although readers are free to make use of the materials included here as they wish. The material included in the “Learning” section, especially that which is concerned with the connection between past and present values and practices in Chinese and Western education, could be a useful way to introduce either a course explicitly devoted to the comparative study of China and the West or an introductory course in Asian studies generally. This section is primarily conceptual and philosophical in tone and content—features that it shares with the “Defining Humans” and “Values and Worldviews” sections. Materials in the “Humans in Families” section are more ethnographic and social-historical, emphasizing autobiographical perspectives and modern scholarly analyses. The “Humans and Their Surroundings” and “Humans

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and Authority” sections are more or less evenly balanced between the intellectual history and social-scientific approaches that characterize other sections. Some of the most interesting material is found in the concluding section, “Review and Overview: Postmodern Challenges,” such as the comparison of skepticism as exemplified by the fourth century BCE thinker Zhuangzi and the French poststructuralist Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) or the discussion of the West’s “Easternizing” during the twentieth century.

The overall themes of this volume are that differences and continuities within and between Chinese and Western civilizations are not easily reducible to judgments of bad and good or right and wrong and that complex contextualization is preferable to simplistic explanations of similarities and dissimilarities between these cultures. The success of the authors in advancing these concerns occasionally is jeopardized by the dangers of Orientalism and Occidentalism that are endemic to such enterprises, and it must be said that the volume succeeds more at presenting a diversified view of the West than at providing a comparably rich view of China (the inclusion of excerpts from Mozi, the “Legalists,” and Mao Zedong notwithstanding). Clearly aimed at an English-reading Chinese audience and printed in typically Chinese fashion on inexpensive paper with dense, minute text, the volume (priced at Chinese ¥ 40 or roughly \$6) reproduces almost all Chinese terms in pinyin romanization and takes its thematic cues from what might be called an essentially Chinese frame of reference that privileges the human experience over and above perspectives oriented toward divine revelation, universal rights, or other characteristically Western values and concerns. One finds oneself quibbling with the sequence of sections chosen by the authors. Why not introduce the volume with the sections on “Defining Humans,” “Values and Worldviews,” and “Learning” before proceeding to the sections on “Humans in Families,” “Humans and Their Surroundings,” and “Humans and Authority,” for example? But these objections are easily resolved by the instructor’s prerogative to assign material as he or she wishes.

In 1725, the Jesuit missionary Carolus Slavicsek transcribed a conversation that he shared with the Yongzheng emperor (r. 1722–1735) of the Qing dynasty. As part of a discussion of cultural differences and similarities between China and the West, the emperor is supposed to have commented that *comparing different religions, which could be at par with the teachings of our scholars? Moreover, you are saying that your canon is not too different from ours. Why are you then forcing it on us? If your canon is not superior, why should we abandon our teachings thousands of years old? If you assert its superiority, then fundamental principles of both teachings should be open to public discussion.*

The great value of *Western Civilization with Chinese Comparisons* is that it enables those who teach about China in the West, as well as those who teach about the West in China, to lay the “fundamental principles of both [civilizations]” open to discussion in the classroom. ■

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