
Zhang Longxi’s *Allegoresis: Reading Canonical Literature East and West* is a comparative study of the political uses of allegory in selected canonical work from China and “the West.” This theme is represented by an assortment of texts, some central to our understanding of the Western tradition, and others for the underrepresented, idiosyncratic, and heretical. In this book, Zhang successfully argues for a need for better nuanced understanding of how allegorical reading and writing practices have been appropriated cross-culturally for political purposes. His triangulation of poetry, politics, and literary interpretation offers new ways of theorizing the relationship of literary practice to politics. He also decodes political rhetoric that may not always be clear if not for its use of political satire and allegory passed down through canonical readings of poetry.

The aim of the book is impressive to bridge political interpretations of literary productions in an East/West context, but suffers from missing key texts in the Western understanding of allegory, most notably the absence of any significant discussion of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and its lengthy commentary tradition. As it stands, however, Zhang’s *Allegoresis* is a superb study in the tradition of comparative literary studies. Zhang handles diverse literary traditions with ease, including Chinese, Hebrew, English, Greek, and Russian works from various historical periods and political climates.

The etymology of allegory, “allos agora,” suggests another outside space—e.g., another forum or marketplace, another site of transaction—and shows clearly that what is being exchanged between the reader, the author, and the text is interpretive power. Allegoresis, as Zhang defines it, is a practice of reading and interpretation, while allegory is concerned primarily with writing. In distinguishing between allegoresis and allegory, Zhang breaks with Western (and primarily Christian) models of interpretation. The four traditional methods of interpreting Biblical texts, that is, the literal (temporal), allegorical (spiritual), tropological (moralizing), and anagogical (mystical), are evinced in such works as John Wyclif’s English translation of the Latin Vulgate Bible from the late-fourteenth century. Wyclif defines the Latin term “allegoria” as a
“goostly vnderstoonding,”¹ a spiritual (ghostly) interpretation, suggesting an immanent state of meaning in the text. Zhang attempts to frame allegory and allegoresis in a broader cultural setting, especially emphasizing political cultures throughout his book.

In his first chapter, “Introduction: The Validity of Cross-Cultural Understanding,” Zhang attempts to uncover the connections between Western Christian understandings of allegory and allegoresis and the Chinese contexts for these modes of reading and writing. Zhang uses the example of the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), whose mission to China enabled him to learn the Chinese language and cultural philosophies. According to Zhang, Ricci

spread the idea that there were “traces of Christianity” in Chinese culture and customs, including “evidences of the cross among the Chinese.” He found in ancient Chinese writing the ideas of tian (Heaven), zhu (Lord), and shangdi (Lord on High), and made use of these terms to translate the Christian God. Of the word tianzhu (Lord of Heaven) for translating God, Ricci says that the missionaries “could hardly have chosen a more appropriate expression.” (footnotes omitted) (12)

Ricci’s appropriation of Chinese terms to translate cultural and spiritual concepts was an attempt to “win over some high officials at the court of the Chinese emperor and to work toward the eventual Christian conversion of China.” (12, 13)

Zhang elaborates further on cross-cultural understandings in his second chapter, “Canon and Allegoresis,” when the Old Testament Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon) and its accompanying midrashic commentary tradition are compared with Han interpretations of the Confucian text, the Book of Poetry. His comparison is engaging, and his conclusions point toward ethical and political readings of both the Song of Songs and the Book of Poetry. By the end of this chapter, Zhang has successfully drawn out the paradigms for his emphasis on the “ethico-political nature of Chinese commentaries,” producing readings of philosophical and historical texts which evince tensions between “the text and interpretation, the literal and the figurative or allegorical, between language and its particular use in various ways and for different purposes.” These readings also examine “the consequences of political overinterpretation.” (110)

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Zhang moves to his third chapter, “Interpretation and Ideology,” comparing Chinese political readings of poetry with exegetical readings of the Biblical Song of Songs, arguing that the act of reinterpretation carries with it potential for political uses. Zhang ties this willful misreading of a poem at court to the pronouncement of Zhao Gao, a eunuch turned prime minister in the court of the second emperor of Qin (207 BCE). Gao claimed that a stag was a horse, and coerced the emperor and nobles to capitulate to that naming. Those who questioned Zhao Gao’s renaming of the stag as a horse were purged in an attempt to instill fear in the newly unified kingdom of Qin.

Comparing Virgil’s Aeneid to the Chinese tradition of historical orientation of poetry, Zhang states that both Virgil and the Chinese classical poets constructed “a glorious antiquity, a past Golden Age,” a feature missing from the Christian poet’s teleological framework, “who judges the present in terms of the end of time.” (53) The Chinese Golden Age includes the “[a]ncient sage-kings and rulers, Yao, Shun, and especially King Wen and the Duke of Zhou.” The “Chinese poets often nostalgically evoke the reign of sage-kings as a yardstick, a paradigm that sets up an unmatched and unmatchable example for the contemporary scene.” (53) These sage-kings were associated with the early Zhou dynasty (c. 1122-256 BCE), and they figure prominently in the commentary tradition of Confucius’ Book of Poetry. Thus, when the Tang Dynasty poet Du Fu (712-70) recalls the reigns of Yao and Shun, the allusion “is more than a mere convention, for it makes use of a deeply entrenched sense of history to legitimize his political aspirations.” (footnote omitted) (53) Zhang’s discussion carries this further:

The reverence for ancient sage-kings, the idealization of the remote past as the final point of reference in judging contemporary social conditions, constitute what might be called a retro-teleology of history, which in a sense predetermines the nostalgic mood of much of classical Chinese poetry that sees the present as always a falling-off from a better and more balanced past. (53)

Here, I issue caution with Zhang’s proposal that this nostalgic historicizing is unlike Christian poetry (or the poetry from writers who happened to be Christian). One might think of Chrétien de Troyes, whose twelfth-century French Arthurian romances constituted such a retro-teleology by recalling the nobility and chivalry of King Arthur’s sixth-century court (in comparison with his own contemporary courtly setting in Champagne). The nostalgic mood of many poetic texts of the Christian Middle Ages in Europe also engaged in this process of looking
back to a more glorious time, usually in a remote past, which could serve as didactic models of political and courtly behavior. In this respect, Zhang’s contribution to the discussion could have been more fruitful had he not relied on Ernst Robert Curtius’s *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages,* which represents an outdated understanding of medieval European literary culture that hurts Zhang’s case for a broad comparison between disparate traditions.

Interestingly, however, this is where Zhang’s discussion becomes most rewarding, when it is intertwined with a renewed conversation on the literary conventions of writing history. Zhang is interested in not reading poetry as history, necessarily, but with “how historiography can itself be read... as imaginative literature.” (56) Across literary disciplines in Western European studies from all periods, the literary history of chronicle writing, historiography, and encyclopedic texts which claims to be historical knowledge has been scrutinized recently in a broad range of fields of inquiry. Where these texts were traditionally reserved for historians (who sifted through what is identifiably factual from what was constituted by invention), literary scholars are now looking through chronicles and histories as generative of cultural and national identities.

Chapter Four offers a cultural reading of Chinese ideas of “Utopia” that contrast with the early modern and contemporary political fiction. Zhang understands Utopia in its classical sense and in the sense that Thomas More used the term: formed from the Greek prefixes “eu-” (“good”) and “ou-” (“non”), Utopia is both a good place and a no-place. Like the political collective, it is abstract, a “political fantasy” which is “inherently allegorical because its story of a socially organized way of life is always meant to expound a political idea, the ideal and principles of a good society.” (165) In contrast to these ideal societies proposed in European Utopic visions, Zhang focuses instead on the image of the political dystopia (Zhang prefers the term anti-utopia), which he sees as having become more dominant than utopian literature in literary genres in the twentieth century. (205)

According to Zhang, dystopian literature was produced by the social and political realities surrounding their authors, and fits into a broader literary tradition of political commentary. The social realities of the rise of totalitarianism in the twentieth century “forced upon the literary imagination... the relevance and cogency of anti-utopian novels.” (205) Novels such as Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and

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George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* continue a tradition of anti-utopian visions that stretch back to nineteenth-century England and France. Zhang makes a particularly incisive and productive move by analyzing a Russian text, Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*, that anticipates the reality of the Stalinist or Hitlerian totalitarian state. In *We*, “all the inhabitants of a dystopian ‘OneState’ are identified not by individual names, but as Numbers, as mere statistics.” (206) Written in 1920-21, Zamyatin provides an “insight into the very logic of totalitarianism that diminishes the individual in the name of the collective.” (206) The conclusion that Zhang draws is that “[t]he most fundamental connection between the two [between utopia and dystopia . . .] is the disregard of the individual in the name of the collective.” (211)

In his conclusion, Zhang continues this thread of political readings with the more contemporary example of Mao Tse-Tung’s “extremely paranoid” reading of Chinese theater. Focusing on political censorship and *wenzi yu* (“imprisonment on account of words”), he compares notions of “literary inquisition” in the context of how literary works are perceived as subversive by ruling political authorities. This draws to the forefront Zhang’s distinction between allegoresis and allegory—where the former is a process of interpretation, and the latter a process of writing. The political strategy of interpretation of literary works is always a process of allegoresis, having detrimental effects on writers and political critics. Theoretical debates over the “subversiveness” in literature have very real political consequences. Zhang warns that it is only when critical voices are “effectively insulated from the power of the state” that literary scholars can celebrate and “discourse on the subversive from a safe distance.” (238) In Zhang’s words, “such a debate becomes an intellectual luxury many writers and scholars outside Western academia cannot afford, since in the real world of political contingencies, such a debate has consequences that are not altogether academic.” (238)

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