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Abstract

This is a book review of Kris H.K. Chong, *Transcendence and Spirituality in Chinese Cinema: A Theological Exploration* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020).

Author Notes

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Chong, Kris H.K., *Transcendence and Spirituality in Chinese Cinema: A Theological Exploration* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020).

Over the last few decades, the interdisciplinary study of theology, religion, and film has been dominated by Christian theological concerns and by attention to Western films. In *Transcendence and Spirituality in Chinese Cinema*, Kris Chong provides a refreshing development within the field, introducing her audience to a rich diversity of mainland Chinese films and filmmakers, and analyzing them in the context of their Chinese culture and spirituality. Chong's contribution to the field is particularly valuable not only because of this refreshing cinematic focus, but also because of the way that she constructs and facilitates a sophisticated dialogue between various Chinese spiritual traditions and the Christian traditions which inform much of the theological-cinematic analysis of the monograph. In navigating the largely uncharted waters between these two dialogue partners, this book constitutes an original reflection on a rich and diverse region of filmmaking that has hitherto been neglected by most Western theologians and scholars of religion. At the same time, it offers an insightful contribution to the theological analysis of film within Christian theology.

Indeed, Chong's concerns are ultimately those of a Christian theologian, and this is borne out by the book's primary methodologies, which are informed variously by the work of Richard A. Blake, Jürgen Moltmann, Paul Tillich, and Robert K. Johnston. In particular, the book makes excellent use of Blake's interpretive concept of "afterimage" which he applied to six filmmakers shaped by the Catholic tradition in his book *Afterimage: The Indelible Catholic Imagination of Six American Filmmakers* (2000). In Blake's work, "afterimage" (which is a psychological term denoting the impression of an image or sensation which lingers after the stimulus has ceased) becomes an apposite metaphor for the way in which filmmakers like Hitchcock, Coppola, and John Ford sustained a lingering Catholic imagination that shaped their work. Chong draws on Blake's metaphor and applies it to the context of Chinese cinema,

arguing that "mainland Chinese films…. are the afterimages and reflections of, and influenced and shaped by, the mainland Chinese directors' religious traditions and childhood experiences" (xvi).

Here, Chong quickly anticipates a potential point of resistance to this central thesis: the well-rehearsed notion that China is a secular or areligious state, devoid of religious practices and traditions. Very early in the text, Chong argues convincingly that this is "a long-held misconception" (2), leaning on scholars like Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who characterises Confucianism as a religion, and C. K. Yang, who observes the supernatural elements of Confucius' teaching, as well as Lagerwey, who suggests that Chinese society more broadly should be understood as a deeply religious society. The book is thus able to maintain the emphasis on the value of analyzing Chinese filmmaking through the lens of religion and spirituality. Indeed, this becomes a recurring contention throughout the monograph, especially in Chapters Two and Four, where the book's premises that "to *be Chinese* is to be religious, and that all cultures are religious in nature" (114) are consistently reiterated.

However, perhaps another preliminary obstacle to the analysis of these films as spiritual "afterimages" of their filmmakers' own religious heritage is an implicit auteurism which is never fully unpacked. At the very least, there are a couple of occasions where the films analyzed are described as "auteur-driven work" (114) and yet there is no indication of a commitment to auteur theory or a recognition of its various critiques and detractors. This is by no means a major flaw in the book, but rather a methodological uncertainty that I would have liked to see clarified: is Chong arguing that these films are the "afterimages" of a single auteur, the art of just one spiritual or religious imagination? Or should we understand these afterimages through the collaborative creative processes of filmmaking, albeit guided by an individual director? Although these questions remain unresolved, the application of Blake's afterimage metaphor to Chinese films is successful, and it bears fruit throughout the five chapters of the

book as Chong develops the metaphor, extending it across various filmmakers working out of mainland China.

Having established the interpretive foundation that Chinese culture has been formed and reformed in the light of its spiritual and religious heritage, the rest of Chapter One is devoted to exploring the nature of Chinese spirituality in more concrete terms. The goal of this, Chong writes, is to open up the possibility "to speak of spirituality in Chinese films without imposing a Western mindset that prevents us from finding and understanding footprints of the Chinese notion of transcendence in films" (1). The question, then, is what exactly "the Chinese notion of transcendence" might be, since there is no immediately recognisable linguistic equivalent to the Western concept. In exploring and responding to this question, the book adopts Diane B. Obenchain's phrase 'More In Life than Meets the Eye,' which Chong ultimately terms "the Chinese conception of Transcendence" at the beginning of Chapter Two (43). In this way, this phrase becomes crucial to the book's central thesis, providing the title for Chapter One and returning to the fore in the key theological moves of Chapter Five.

In both the Preface and Chapter One, 'More In Life than Meets the Eye' is expounded and anatomised in detail. The 'More' of this phrase signifies the *more* of a radical transcendence; it is used in order "to represent the notion of Transcendence/the Divine, rather than utilising the Judeo-Christian notion of 'God'" (xvii). In a section titled "Discerning the 'More'" (5), Chong attends to the concept of *Tian* (roughly translated as 'Heaven') and analyses this over the next few sections of the chapter through detailed readings of ancient texts, such as the *Analects*. Chong also considers Daoist understandings of *Tian*, as well as those found in those Confucianist texts. Similarly, the concept of *Shen* (which Chong advocates should be expressed in English multivalently as 'spirit', 'spirits', or 'spiritual') is also analyzed as a key component of the 'more' in Chinese notions of transcendence. Chapter One goes on to observe the complexity and multivalent meanings of the term *Shen*, before concluding that

"the common expressions of *spirit*, *spirits*, and *spiritual* help us understand the Chinese notion of god in significant ways." (19) Ultimately, this exposition of *Tian* and *Shen* leads to a vital conclusion about the nature of the 'More' in Chong's understanding of the Chinese notion of transcendence – that this is an *immanent-transcendence*. As Chong puts it:

> The Chinese sense of Transcendence is also Immanent-transcendence, since the Chinese person is not only drawn to the 'More,' that which is sacred in life; he/she also continually reveres this 'More' and participates in it, moving in tandem with the 'More' as it leads, culminating in the betterment of others (25).

It is for this reason that the preposition 'in' is preferred to the preposition 'to' here, which is the norm in the English idiom ('there is more *to* x than meets the eye'). 'In' emphasises the immanence of this 'More', conceptualizing transcendence as something that is discerned *in* the world, through a participatory movement deeper into everyday existence, rather than through a movement above or somehow beyond the world. Transcendence is not discerned by detachment or from a distance, but only by the individual's involvement in spiritual practice and/or ritual (for example through the worship of family ancestors) (19).

Chapter Two builds on this analysis of the Chinese notion of transcendence by introducing a (perhaps surprising) dialogue partner: the German theologian Paul Tillich. Naturally, Chong acknowledges that Tillich may seem an inappropriate interlocuter at first glance, but she pushes back against this by emphasizing Tillich's openness to other religious traditions in his understanding of revelation: "Tillich finds non-Christian religious traditions are also examples of divine involvement in the world, including the unveiling of revelation from the perspective of other worldviews" (44). For this reason Tillich's theology, and especially his notion of 'ultimate concern', becomes "an appropriate theological framework to understand the 'human condition'… in Chinese films" (43). This chapter then critically explores two main elements of Tillich's thought: his work on culture and religion; and his existential analysis of religion and religious life. The first of these elements is highlighted by Tillich's famous quotation that "The form of religion is culture and the substance of culture is

religion" (cited on 45). The second element is given more detailed attention than Tillich's theology of culture, and forms the bulk of the chapter's analysis. Ultimately, Chong highlights Tillich's existential work (especially on angst, hope, and courage), insofar as it informs his work on art and aesthetics.

A particular strength of this chapter is its attention to Tillich's little-known (and very short) essay "One Moment of Beauty" and to his well-known book *The Courage to Be*. What particularly elevates this analysis is Chong's decision to interlace this part of the chapter with filmic analysis, considering two "Cinematic Illustrations" of each of Tillich's texts (Zhuangzhuang's 1993 film *The Blue Kite* on 59 and then Kaige's 1993 film *Farewell My Concubine* on 65). By exploring Tillich's work alongside these two films, Chong adopts a dialogical approach where the form and structure of the chapter reflects the same reciprocity of its central question: "how might Tillich's approach to existential anxiety inform a theological interpretation of mainland Chinese films? And, in return, what might these films offer for theological consideration?" (59).

With the exposition of the Chinese notion of transcendence complete ('More In Life than Meets the Eye'), and with Tillich's theological framework set out and tested in practice, the book moves on to consider in detail the "afterimages" of its selected filmmakers in Chapters Three and Four. Chapter Three focuses on the much celebrated fifth generation filmmakers of Chinese cinema, while Chapter Four considers the post-1990s Sixth Generation. These two chapters work in tandem to substantiate and justify the book's central thesis, which Chong articulates early on in the book:

> The essential argument of this thesis is: it is the afterimage of Chinese traditions in the works of the Fifth Generation filmmakers that makes their imagination and works particularly and irrevocably Chinese—traditions that are, at their core, religious. In contrast, the Sixth Generation filmmakers tell stories which reflect the agony and angst of human life, portraying mainly the ultimate concern of their film characters (33).

Three fifth generation filmmakers in particular come to the fore in these chapters: Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, and Feng Xiaogang. The two chapters proceed with concise, focussed sections, which sometimes explore and analyze specific films, and which sometimes consider the cultural-religious themes and historical context in which these films were made. The filmic analysis is, on the whole, incisive, balancing narrative interpretation with thematic and conceptual studies of each film. There are also several instances in these two chapters of excellent technical cinematic analysis, considering crucial elements like framing, composition, *mise-en-scene*, and editing (particularly in the passages concerning Chen Kaige), although readers who are primarily interested in the films themselves may find themselves desiring a more sustained technical analysis of this sort. Overall, however, the cinematic engagement of these two chapters is a real strength of the book.

Following the detailed discussion of both the Fifth and Sixth Generation filmmakers, the monograph climaxes with a final chapter, titled "Toward a Wider Presence in Chinese Films." This title alludes to a key influence on its theological analysis: Robert K. Johnston's concept of "God's wider Presence," (136) which is juxtaposed with Jürgen Moltmann's theology of the Spirit's indwelling presence. Yet, despite the fresh introduction of these two theological voices at so late a stage in the book, this final chapter also serves as a fitting conclusion, drawing together the various threads of the preceding chapters and further substantiating the book's central arguments.

This final chapter is particularly notable for the way that it carries the analysis of Chinese cinema, religion, and spirituality into an analysis firmly grounded in Christian theology. Pneumatology in particular (and Trinitarian theology more broadly) plays a crucial role, with Chong arguing that "there is a connection between the Spirit at work today and the Chinese notion of the 'More"' with which the films are concerned" (136), before going on to "use [Moltmann's and Johnston's] work to elucidate how the doctrine of the indwelling Spirit

of life invites conversation with the Chinese notion of revelation exemplified in 'More in Life than Meets the Eye,' thus establishing an East-West inter-religious film dialogue" (136). A particular emphasis of this connection for Chong is that a pneumatology of 'wider presence' "allows us to engage the Spirit who is the Power of life, the identity of God that is the enlivening presence in creation, without the need for soteriological concern." (151). In this way, Chong takes pains to make this connection without lapsing into soteriological exclusivism. Nonetheless, Chong goes as far as to identify the 'More' of Chinese spirituality directly with the Spirit of the Christian Trinity: "the Spirit is a pervasive and dynamic Force who works throughout the world, time, and space, being the particular Presence of God and/or the "More" within and in this context, Chinese communities" (151).

With this final theological move, Chong has achieved the inter-religious dialogue concerning Chinese cinema that the book set out to accomplish. Of course, both the initial possibility of this dialogue and its ultimate boundaries are defined by Christian theology in the book, rather than by Chinese spirituality (or secularity). Yet this should be unsurprising given that it is primarily a work of Christian theology. Crucially, the "afterimages" of the Chinese filmmakers examined throughout the text are explored with nuance and with sophisticated attention to the complexity of their Chinese religious and spiritual heritage. The result is an engaging and thought-provoking book, which opens up Chinese religious and spiritual traditions to new audiences, and which brings Western students and scholars into contact with these rich, but lamentably neglected, traditions.