Book Review/Compte rendu

Hans Ulrich Vogel and **Gunter Dux**, editors, Introduction and Overview by Mark Elvin, *Concepts of Nature: A Chinese-European Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010, 566pp. US $241 hardcover (ISBN 978 90 04 18526 5)

The ongoing debates over the "great divergence" between Europe and the rest of the world continue to generate scholarly light as well as considerable polemical heat. Some scholars appear to be alarmed by what they perceive to be the dilution or even the destruction of some allegedly pure European culture by multicultural barbarians who are well within the gates. Others seek to exorcise the allegedly pernicious effects of some homogenous European or Western culture on their allegedly pristine and hermetically sealed existence. Overwrought accusations of Orientalism, Occidentalism, Eurocentrism, and Nativism continue to be traded. Despite the proverbial exceptions that alert us to the rules, many proponents on each side of the divide have couched their arguments in a culturalist mode in which culture is assumed to be relatively unhinged from social structure.

In stark contrast to the prevailing intellectual mood, the fifteen contributors to *Concepts of Nature* enter this debate with a calm demeanour that, in addition to enhancing our understanding of the important issue of patterns of culture and cognition, promises to considerably cool the temperatures raised by unrestrained polemics. Deploying conceptions of nature and science as the criterion, the contributors to this volume seek to analyze the varying degrees of convergence and divergence between cultures in imperial China and ancient Greece in particular and Europe until 1700 in general. The overall conceptual framework that broadly informs all the papers is sociologist Gunter Dux's "Historical-Genetic Theory of Culture" which deploys and develops Jean Piaget's argument that all cultures share a broadly similar pattern of development in the childhood of individuals up until a latency period during and after which, cultural variations or divergences emerge. The contributors to the volume also implicitly adopt the sociology of knowledge framework deployed by Joseph M. Bryant in his *Moral Codes and Social Structure in Ancient Greece* by explicitly exploring the complex interconnections between patterns of intellectual culture, knowledge, and social structure.

As the renowned China specialist Mark Elvin points out in his lucid and engaging "Overview," despite the differing emphases, the general intellectual goal of all the contributors to this volume is to pursue the question of whether it is possible to identify some general underlying trends in the development of human cognitive capacities beneath the seemingly infinite global cultural variations.

Not unexpectedly, the findings of this important yet complex quest are unlikely to satisfy those who prefer to live in ideologically sealed either Orientalist or Occidentalist tents. As Mark Elvin points out (p. 2), those searching for an overall, definitive resolution to the questions will be disappointed mostly because the project itself is as yet not quite developed to satisfy the demand or even expectations of complete answers. However, this in itself does not mean that such questions should not be pursued with the help of existing research and empirical material with the aim of provoking further research as well as the identification of the strengths, possible problems, perils, and pitfalls of comparative historical sociology. According to Elvin, one of these pitfalls is the frequent comparison of the intellectual culture of China in the imperial age with modern rather than Europe in late antiquity or the medieval era. For example, predictive and interpretative astrology based on the assumption of a complex web of links between events in the heavens above and the earth below was widely accepted in late Western antiquity through the eleventh century. As Elvin points out, it disappeared or went underground only to be revived during the Renaissance. This form of predictive astrology that was created initially in what is now the Middle-East or West Asia, arrived in China sometime in the middle of the first millennium AD where it became interwoven with the pre-existing older Chinese systems of astrology. Thus although there were clear differences and dissimilarities between the practices of calendrico-predictive astrology in Europe and China during the same periods, it nonetheless offers an example of considerable overlap in many basic respects. While it is common to contrast the "correlative" character of Chinese thought about nature in middle antiquity with the causal science of modern Europe, when similar periods are compared, it is the similarities rather than the differences that are more striking. After a detailed analysis of Chinese texts from late antiquity, Elvin's general point is that despite obvious differences and variations, it would be a mistake to assume that educated Chinese and educated western Europeans inhabited totally distinct mental universes in their styles of thinking about the natural world. Such claims and conclusions derive from the problematic comparison of apples with lychees.

In a brief review, it would be impossible to summarize the important analyses and arguments of all the fifteen contributors on the issue of degrees of convergences and divergences between China and Europe. However, in view of the heightened debates over climate change and specific cultural attitudes and practices vis-à-vis the natural world, Heiner Roetz's paper "On Nature and Culture in Zhou China" is worth singling out. Roetz analyzes classical Daoist and Confucian texts as well as the prevailing natural context to argue against the dominant view — subscribed to by Max Weber among others — that classical Chinese culture promoted spiritual oneness and harmony with nature. More often than not, Daoist texts are interpreted as promoting harmony with nature while Confucianism is presumed to be hostile to it. It is assumed that Confucianism, as opposed to Daoism, welcomes the development of culture to deal with an inhospitable natural world. Roetz takes issue with this dominant interpretation.

Taking the material, natural context into account, Roetz argues that the key Daoist texts on nature have to be interpreted not as some primordial sentiment of harmony with nature but as specific responses to environmental disasters that have already occurred. The contextual interpretation of Daoist texts on nature allows one to move away from primordial and culturalist understanding of some timeless, essentialist Chinese attitude of harmony with nature that can be contrasted with some equally essentialist Western attempts to contest and control it.

The overall message of the book is not that when it comes to conceptions of nature and science, there were no differences at all between classical China and Europe. Indeed, Geoffrey Lloyd's contribution to the study of the differences between premodern sciences in China and Europe is continually acknowledged. Rather, the broader point made by all the contributors is that more often than not, the divergences have been overemphasized at the expense of the many broad convergences. While thankfully resisting a definitive conclusion, all contributors to this important volume seek to connect intellectual culture with the changing social structures to better understand the dynamics underlying the similarities and differences. As Elvin summarizes the broad perspective of the contributors, "the European scientific renaissance apart, critical differences look as if they were less in the potential capabilities of the two societies than in the social-intellectual matrices through which those interested in scientific topics interacted … these were far fewer in relative numbers in China than in Western Europe" (p. 55). Connecting social structures to intellectual cultures and practices and promoting comparisons that are methodologically sound, the overall contribution of this important and intellectually exciting book is to initiate a much needed

research program that promises to move the discussion beyond the shrill polarized positions orchestrated by the Orientalists and the Occidentalists.

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