

Culture Mandala: The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies

The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies

Volume 6 | Issue 1

Article 5

1-1-2003

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Recommended Citation

Little, Reg (2003) "When civilizations compete: A review of Steven Shankman & Stephen W. Durrant (eds), *Early China / Ancient Greece: Thinking through comparisons*," *Culture Mandala: The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <http://epublications.bond.edu.au/cm/vol6/iss1/5>

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When civilizations compete: A review of Steven Shankman & Stephen W. Durrant (eds), *Early China / Ancient Greece: Thinking through comparisons*

Abstract

The first edited volume in Sino-Hellenic Studies, this book compares early Chinese and Ancient Greek thought and culture.

Shankman, S. & Durrant, S. W. (2002) *Early China / Ancient Greece: Thinking through comparisons*, Albany, State University of New York Press. ISBN: 0791453138

Keywords

China, Greece, civilization, philosophy, culture

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When Civilizations Compete:

A Review of Steven Shankman & Stephen W. Durrant (eds)

Early China / Ancient Greece: Thinking Through Comparisons

(N.Y., State University of New York Press, 2002)

by Reg Little

When civilizations compete in the marketplace, as distinct from engaging in military contest on the battlefield, it is easy to misread the progress of events. There are many reasons for this, ranging from uncertainties about the definition of the competing civilizations to uncertainties about the nature of the competition. Moreover, disinformation is rife - advantage is often won by those who are superior in self-sacrifice, discretion and sensitivity and lost by the self-serving, loud and insensitive.

The economic rise of Japan, followed by other East Asia communities and finally by China, despite the hiccup of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, has begun to pose the peoples of the West with their first serious challenge in five hundred years. Many are still in denial about the facts - mounting debt and dependency amongst Western leaders and growing foreign assets and hi-tech manufacturing power throughout Asia. Even so, the time for deeper consideration of the sources of Asian competitive success arrived long ago.

One of the leaders in publishing studies into the character of East Asian civilization has been the State University of New York Press. The 2002 publication of *Early China / Ancient Greece: Thinking Through Comparisons* in the series Chinese Philosophy and Culture is an important example of an emerging trend for American universities to look more deeply into and contrast the roots of Western and East Asian civilization. This, of course, is demanding and treacherous work. There is no easy way of identifying simply the nature of East Asian, or Western civilization.

Yet its initial paper, *What Has Athens to Do with Alexandria? or Why Sinologists Can't Get Along with(out) Philosophers*, by philosopher David L Hall makes several important points, none more important than that the skills of the philosopher are essential in understanding the true intent of an unfamiliar tradition of civilization. If one pauses, as Hall does, to reflect on the different meanings attributed to the Chinese *dao* and to the English *truth*, ideas central to the respective traditions, it becomes clear that there is much room for misunderstanding between the two languages and related cultures. While Hall's essay might be criticized for a type of refinement that is of more interest to the specialist philosopher than the general reader looking to understand contemporary practicalities, it is equally true that his type of careful path-breaking work is essential in correcting many errors which have become widely accepted as a result of past translations of Chinese classic works. In passing, he offers critical insights, such as the Chinese preference for the aesthetic, plural and particular over the rational, unified and universal. Most importantly, he highlights the unjustified belief of Western philosophy and cosmology in one world order with relatively stable laws.

The second paper, *No Time Like the Present: The Category of Contemporaneity in Chinese Studies*, by Haun Saussy, deploys professional skills in comparative literature and Asian languages to review some attempts to explore and define the Orient and the Occident and to come to the conclusion that "when one compares European and Chinese thought (however those objects are to be determined), the sheer informational 'noise' of unorganized differences threatens to overwhelm the investigation".

In a paper titled *Humans and Gods: The Theme of Self-Divination in Early China and Early Greece*, Michael Puett examines claims of self-divinisation in both cultures, which emerged in religious and

political contexts dominated by theistic beliefs and practices. He undertakes this in order to advocate a contextual and historical approach to evaluating respective cosmologies in Greece and China and reveal why particular claims were being made and who they were being made against.

These Three Come Forth Together But are Differently Named: Laozi, Zhuangzi and Plato by Steven Shankman examines how the two great Chinese Daoist thinkers and the most influential Greek philosopher address a similar issue. Shankman and the other editor of this collection have also authored *The Siren and the Sage: Knowledge and Wisdom in Ancient Greece and China*, a book that notes the growing body of scholarly work exploring and contrasting these two seminal civilizations and seeks to outline the Greek use of logical proof to satisfy the desire to know and the Chinese caution that the desire to know might lead to the forfeiting of wisdom. In Shankman's piece in this book, he suggests that Chinese reflections on the relation between language and the *dao*, as articulated in particular passages of Laozi and Zhuangzi, and between language and the philosophical quest, as articulated by Plato in a key passage in the *Symposium*, could be summed up in Laozi's phrase *These Three Come Forth Together But are Differently Named*.

Unfortunately, for the reader who is not a professional philosopher there is a sense that both Puett and Shankman, as well as other writers in this volume, have a tendency to engage in a measure of intellectual showmanship at the expense of using the opportunity to illustrate the contemporary relevance of the comparisons they draw.

Roger Ames' *Thinking Through Comparisons: Analytical and Narrative Methods for Cultural Understanding* probes deeply into the character of key, but diverse, Chinese classics, *The Analects*, *The Daodejing* and *The Yijing*, to show that "'Knowing', then, is not a knowing what, which provides some understanding of the environing conditions of the natural world, but is rather a knowing how to be adept in relationships, and how, in optimizing the possibilities that these relations provide, to develop trust in their viability". Ames concludes that it is more important in these Chinese classics for teachers and friends, rather than propositions, to be true. Experience in East Asia suggests that this focus on relationship and trust in relationships still characterizes behavior throughout the region today. It offers a stark contrast with Western civilization where the emphasis on the individual and the freedom and flexibility of the individual has become a dominant influence. One contemporary social commentator has recently written of *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* in the contemporary Western world. Ames' insight about the contrasting character of 'truth', depending on the choice between an Eastern and Western perspective, should be part of the armory of all negotiators - military, political, commercial and institutional - who venture into the region. It rarely is!

Hall also highlights "the singular importance of the 'family' metaphor in the definition of relational order within Chinese culture. This again contrasts starkly with the contemporary West's fetish for equality in all things, even to the point where fundamental responsibilities are abandoned and communities fragment and become vulnerable. Much could be written on this and other substantial issues raised by Hall but this should offer some insight into some of the consequences of *Thinking Through Comparisons*.

Epistemology in Cultural Context: Disguise and Deception in Early China and Early Greece, by the distinguished scholar of ancient China, David N Knightly, further explores the way in which early Greek and Chinese writing - both narrative and philosophical - prepared the ground for cultivating amongst later readers contrasting fashions of thinking and almost opposite values of knowledge. He achieves this partly by sketching how a Chinese writer might have handled the account of Homer's treatment of Penelope's suitors. Knightly does not suggest this, but his paper could be used to support the view that the Greek tradition nurtured cerebral skepticism while the Chinese sought to encourage practical, intuitive discipline.

The Logic of Signs in Early Chinese Rhetoric by David Schaberg explores some 'common ground on which the modes of argumentation adopted by Chinese and Greek writers might be compared' in

order to caution against generalizing from limited specific examples about the differences between the two traditions. In the process Schaberg clarifies important and authoritative features of classical Chinese thought that often do not appeal to contemporary Western readers.

Andrew Plaks' *Means and Means: A Comparative Reading of Aristotle's Ethics and the Zhongyong* identifies a number of shared viewpoints and a number of areas of divergence. The former include the great difficulty of striking and applying the golden mean in human affairs; the common tendency to err either on the side of excess or deficiency; the variable nature of the mean as a point of balance; and the relationship between the mean in individual character and harmonious balance in the larger world order. The latter - the areas of divergence - include the comparative lack of the logical method, formal proof and use of syllogism in the Confucian text, the *Zhongyong*, when Aristotle is preoccupied with these; the absence of the Western sense of justice from the central Chinese focus on rulership; and the Chinese concern with a simultaneous grasp of an entire axis of variation. Plaks points out that these divergences can be qualified but that they reflect the dominant character of the two works. One might add that they still reflect fundamental divergences in the character of the two worlds.

In *Fatalism, Fate and Stratagem in China and Greece*, Lisa Raphals highlights that "change and resilience are the order of the day and open to human strategy and ingenuity" in pre-Buddhist Chinese accounts while "Greek accounts of fate contain a significant fatalist element". She concludes, however, by indicating that much remains to be explored in relation to comparative problems of life and death, medicine, warfare and military strategy, finance and politics in the two traditions.

In *Cratylus and Xunzi on Names* Anthony C Yu notes the Confucian view that "ineffectual speech becomes logically a first symptom of moral and social disorder". He goes on to emphasize the view of modern scholars that the purpose Xunzi confers on names is both prescriptive and practical rather than theoretical. From this follows Xunzi's view that language philosophy has no independent viability than to serve political philosophy. He concludes by identifying both Cratylus' dialectician and Xunzi's kingly one as sharing a concern for the correct use of names, although Xunzi's kingly one has a political authority and responsibility that is uniquely characteristic of the Chinese tradition.

In *Golden Spindles and Axes: Elite Women in the Achaemenid and Han Empires* Michael Niven warns that "every act of cultural replication over time require incredible maneuvers, often to reposition older cultural elements for new ends". A civilization's strength and authority is determined largely by the intellectual maturity with which it maintains the vitality of a tradition through this "cultural replication".

In the final article, *Creating Tradition: Sima Qian Agonistes?*, Stephen W Durrant, the other of the two editors, commences his comments with the following words:

In his provocative book *Adversaries and Authorities: Investigations into Ancient Greek and Chinese Science*, G E R Lloyd takes up an old but still intriguing issue - the supposed contrast between the notoriously antagonistic Greeks and the irenic Chinese. Lloyd's exploration of this topic passes through three stages, which he outlines at the beginning of his chapter: (1) an examination of "what can be said for such a view"; (2) a critique of the traditional contrast; and (3) an attempt to move beyond description to explanation - "to consider not just what is the case, but why". The latter stage leads to an examination of institutional relationships, particularly those of teacher to student and thinker to ruler, which may help us understand "attitudes of adversality and of respect for authority evinced in Greek and Chinese philosophy and science".

Durrant does not explore this contrast in the areas of philosophy and science, which have interested Lloyd and a colleague of his Nathan Sivin, but in that of historiography. Here he recognizes the role and importance of contrasting literary and political institutions but concludes that the Chinese situation is deceptive and much more complex than it might seem at first. He sees a strong element of adversality cloaked in forms of deference and tradition that have misled some commentators. Nevertheless, Durrant does not question in any fundamental way the stark contrasts between Greek

and Chinese cultural and political environments and the consequences these have in a wide variety of intellectual activity.

Early China/Ancient Greece: Thinking Through Comparisons outlines some of the complexity and diversity of these two traditions at an early time and reminds the reader of many of the main areas of fundamental contrast. It also suggests the work still to be undertaken in exploring the continuing relevance of these early differences as the processes of globalisation force two still fundamentally different ways of understanding the world to work in ever increasing cooperation with one another. The character of human nature and political process makes it inevitable cooperation will also be competition. The economic developments of recent decades suggest that those who draw on Chinese cultural and intellectual practices are well equipped to match wits and wills with those who look to Ancient Greece to legitimize their thought and behavior.

The so-called Confucian tradition, which is explored in much of its complexity in this volume, poses many challenges to people who naturally seek to understand and explain world in terms of Greek and Christian traditions of thought and belief, perhaps updated with Enlightenment and Post-Modernist fashions. The West's global conquests of the past five hundred years, however, make it necessary to master these alternative ways of thought and belief, and of organization. Otherwise, the rewards of a remarkable half millennia of achievement will be weakly surrendered by ignorance, under challenge from ancient, unfamiliar but resurgent civilizations, inspired to reinvent themselves by humiliations imposed by alien intruders.

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This book offers the first detailed comparative study of the seven best-documented early civilizations: ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, Shang China, the Aztecs and adjacent peoples in the Valley of Mexico, the Classic Maya, the Inka, and the Yoruba. Unlike previous studies, equal attention is paid to similarities and differences in their sociopolitical organization, economic systems, religion, and culture.

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