


BOOK REVIEWS

Kelly James Clark and Justin Winslett *A Spiritual Geography of Early Chinese Thought: Gods, Ancestors, and Afterlife*

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‘The Chinese don’t believe in God.’ I heard this statement on more than one occasion when I lived in China. It is the default assumption in contemporary sinology. Kelly James Clark and Justin Winslett, however, take aim at this view in their welcomed volume, *A Spiritual Geography of Early Chinese Thought: Gods, Ancestors, and Afterlife*. Clark and Winslett argue through an analysis of key historical texts that China has not only a rich theistic tradition, but that even Confucius (Kongzi), arguably the most important Chinese philosopher to walk this earth, was plausibly a theist. In what follows, I will summarize the four sections that make up the book. After doing this, I’ll conclude with a critical reflection.

In Part 1, ‘High Gods and their Critics’, Clark and Winslett point out that in the *Shangshu*, Di, Shangdi, and Tian (heaven) seem to be used interchangeably. One line of evidence they give relates to ‘Announcements to the Prince of Kang’ where Di and Shangdi, ‘shift without notice to Tian’ (14). It is true that scholars have argued that during the Warring States period, Tian becomes an impersonal force. But as the authors point out, there is no reason to think this given how anthropomorphically Tian is talked about. In fact, Clark and Winslett argue that the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven (Tian), China’s central political philosophy, connects to early Chinese theology (17). Perhaps Clark and Winslett’s best argument for thinking Tian should be understood as a high god in ancient Chinese texts relates to there being 169 times where Tian is represented anthropomorphically, which constitutes 55 per cent of when Tian is used. Shangdi is talked about anthropomorphically 35 times and Di 23 times. This accounts for 47 and 60 per cent in which these terms are used. As they put it, ‘Statistically speaking, anthropomorphic representations account for a majority of instances in the case of Tian and Shangdi’ (21).

This isn’t just the case in so-called ‘pre-Confucian’ sources; we see something similar in Xunzi, Mozi, and Zhuangzi as well. While Xunzi frequently dissociates Tian from human affairs, Xunzi is still committed to anthropomorphizing Tian (34). In the *Mozi*, Tian is said to understand all; Tian can even ‘see’ all persons no matter their location; (35) and Tian is even shown to have human emotions (38). While we see more development in how Tian is

used even in the allegedly atheistic *Zhuangzi*, again, we see Tian represented as having human emotions and qualities (42).

Part 2 is devoted to 'God and the Philosophers'. As previously stated, Confucius is arguably the most important Chinese philosopher. So it would be a blow to the 'Chinese don't believe in God' narrative if Confucius were a theist. Confucius in the *Analects* affirms that Tian is the source of morality and social order, the cosmogonic grounding of goodness (58), and the director of human affairs (70).

In the *Mencius*, the so-called 'second Confucius', we also see Tian and Shangdi mentioned. However, certain scholars argue that their appearance is only for rhetorical reasons (71). Clark and Winslett point out that like Confucius, Mencius was a product of the Shang and Shu dynasties, where as shown earlier, collectively these dynasties hold to the existence of a high god. Clark and Winslett point out that Tian is said to be the creator of the people and the one who appoints the leaders (through the Mandate of Heaven) (78). That is to say, Tian is equated with the Lord on High. There is no reason to be sceptical of Mencius's use of Tian as if he only seems to be a theist to make rhetorical flourishes. The burden of proof is on the sceptic.

As the authors point out, it is also commonplace to argue that the early Chinese did not believe in the afterlife, which is the subject of Part 3, 'Ancestors and the Afterlife'. According to Clark and Winslett, something like the following is argued: (1) The early Chinese lacked a conception of a non-physical soul. (2) The early Chinese had no conception of a non-physical soul in order to believe in an afterlife. Therefore, (3) the early Chinese didn't believe in an afterlife (87). Clark and Winslett are careful not to make universal claims about what the early Chinese believed. But they go on to argue from various texts that at least some early Chinese explicitly believed in an afterlife (89–90). Another form of evidence that is given to support their claim relates to countless ghost stories in ancient texts. When reading such texts, a hard materialist conception of the mind seems far off (109). And a more dualist or tri-partite soul makes the most sense of the abundant evidence for an afterlife journey.

In the fourth and final part of their volume, 'A Deeper Dive', Clark and Winslett give a primer on contemporary cognitive science of religion. There they inform the reader that the paradigmatic view in the field is that belief in the supernatural is natural to human faculties for various evolutionary reasons. Within this backdrop, they argue that we should reconsider the relevant texts mentioned throughout the book. In doing so, it puts the burden of proof on Clark and Winslett's opponents to argue that early Chinese thought is not theistic or oriented towards the supernatural (140–161).

Having now summarized the volume, I turn to reflect critically on Clark and Winslett's overall project. I do wonder if some of the dogmatic pushback in contemporary sinology that Clark and Winslett anticipate relates to an overly anthropomorphic view of God. That is, perhaps the default understanding of theism assumes that God is a person like you or me. And such a God is unworthy of rational discourse. Perhaps echoes of Zeus come to mind. Instead, I wonder if there would be as much pushback if we understood God as classical theists define Him. God isn't a being but rather Being itself. He is the source and grounding of all existent things. He is identical to Goodness itself. On this view, all positive predications can only be understood analogically, especially given the classical theist's commitment to the doctrine of divine simplicity. Like the Dao, God is ineffable. And yet God is the ultimate source of all movement. It would be interesting to see Clark and Winslett engage with the sort of theism described and see how the passages they cite square with it. I imagine that these texts would fit nicely with this conception of God, perhaps at times even better. Here, I especially think of the relevant texts associated with Confucius.

Overall, I cannot stress enough the importance of Clark and Winslett's work. A work like theirs is long overdue. It should prove to be a lasting and necessary resource for all of those interested in studies related to the philosophies of China and sinology more generally.

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Robyn Horner and Claude Romano (eds), *The Experience of Atheism: Phenomenology, Metaphysics and Religion*

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This volume is a creative result of the project 'Atheism and Christianity: Moving Past Polemic' (2017–2019), led by the Institute for Religion and Critical Inquiry (IRCI) at the Australian Catholic University (ACU). Instead of approaching atheism simply as a collection of philosophical arguments against the existence of God, the authors in this volume – an international group of scholars following in the tradition of French phenomenology and cognate schools of thought – delve into atheism as a lived experience. In their opening chapter the editors introduce two varieties of atheism to the reader: (i) 'literalist atheism', or the theoretical denial that any deities exist; and (ii) atheism as a 'loss of God'. This second variety is an experiential variant of unbelief which has been often called 'practical atheism', where God is felt to be absent in a personal sense (as in the crucifixion in the Gospels) or as a cultural event (Nietzsche's apocalyptic pronouncement that 'God is Dead').

The first part of the book introduces the 'experience of atheism', the absence of God as a lived reality. The late Jean-Luc Nancy, in the second chapter, paints a grim picture of modern atheism, describing it as spiritually arid. He expands upon a quotation from a Jean-Christophe Bailly novel, *Adieu: Essai sur la mort des dieux* (1993), stating that 'atheism has not found a way to irrigate its own desert' (19). Jeffrey Bloechl explores a particular type of atheism where an individual desires to believe in God but cannot. He delineates four forms of disbelief with different affects attached: (i) an 'atheism of refusal', a zealous and critical answer to religion that aims to create an alternative to faith, and (ii) an 'atheism of loss' which denies the existence of God through the recognition of human suffering. He further classifies (iii) the 'atheism of closure', a form of belief where non-believers no longer treat the problem of theism as a live issue, and (iv) 'frustrated atheism', where an individual is given the opportunity to have faith in God, and hopes to believe, but is somehow unable to. The fourth chapter, by Christiane Malabou, turns to anarchist thought, where repeated attempts have been made since the nineteenth century to topple the