# *Book Review*—A Cloud Across the Pacific: Essays on the Clash between Chinese and Western Political Theories Today[1] *by Thomas A. Metzger*

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Dr. Thomas Metzger is a Sinologist with a Ph.D. from Harvard. He is a Professor Emeritus at the University of California in San Diego, and has taught in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Mainland. Not only has he read extensively, he has also discussed philosophy and political science at length with Chinese scholars.

This is not an easy book. When you find it in a bookstore, if the thick volume is not wrapped in clear plastic, turn to p. 671, skim eight pages, "Western Philosophy on the Defensive?" and then decide if you want to buy the book and tackle it. His Chapter XI should have been placed at the beginning as an overview. Even for those familiar with both Chinese and Western philosophy, Metzger's nuanced study of recent political debate in both China and the West is not for the fainthearted.

Political figures in the West (here meaning mainly the USA) and in China often voice frustration and bewilderment at the actions of their counterparts across the Pacific. To get to the bottom of problems, philosophers bring implicit assumptions out into the open and list the clichés that are indisputable in one culture, but which often puzzle or anger people from another culture. Metzger's hope is that the insights of political philosophers will eventually guide the actions of politicians and ease global tensions.

I'm reminded of an old political joke about the contrast between the ideal and the real. Someone wrote at length about how

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the U.S. political system should function, what great results would follow from reform, but how hard, even impossible, it would be to implement this program. Another scholar quipped: "His book can be summarised in a sentence, and in a word. In a sentence, create utopia. In a word, despair." Westerners tend to laugh at this joke, or at least grin, then go on to tinker with the political system making minor improvements, or at least alleviating some of the worst abuses. At the risk of generalising, Chinese take politics more seriously, from a disillusioned scholar who committed suicide in 1927 (p. 51), to the trauma of invasion and civil war from 1937 to 1949 (p. 208), to the current exchange of punches among politicians in Taiwan, where democratisation has failed to deliver the high expectations of earlier visionaries (Ch. 6).

What accounts for such different responses to the blurring of the sacred and the demonic (p. 250) in political life? Metzger's surprising answer is epistemology. Half of his *magnum opus* deals with GMWER, the Great Modern Western Epistemological Revolution. What do we know and how do we know it? The Western secular answer is quite pessimistic: We know something from science, but the gap from "is" to "ought" is huge. Morality cannot be deduced in detail from the natural world. Even if moral relativism does not overwhelm, different cultures give different answers to the problems of society, and there is little common ground on which to base a program of action. Let maximum individual freedom in the "three marketplaces" (economic, intellectual and political) shape the future, and keep government intervention to a minimum (p. 32). In contrast, the Chinese, even scholars who obtained their degrees in the USA, tend to overlook the GMWER or to explain it away without a struggle. They remain optimistic that the right answers are out there, to be found by sages and scholars (if they have not already been found ages ago), and successfully put into action by moral, sincere and competent government leaders (Table 1, pp.17-19).

Contemporary China and the USA both talk about national security, economic prosperity, equality, freedom (democracy), and modernisation, and debate the moral or sacred values that should accompany modernisation. Discourse #1 (Chinese) and Discourse #2 (Western) differ over utopian or limited goals, epistemological

optimism or pessimism, universal human nature and historical trends, and systematic or piecemeal transformation (Table 2, pp. 91-101). What striking contrasts! Now I finally see how U.S. politicians who run successfully against "big government" and base their campaigns on being "an outsider to the political establishment" must be totally incomprehensible in China.

What is missing? Religion, or at least Western religions. Chapter II, "T'ang Chun-i's Rejection of Western Modernity," requires numerous references to Buddhism to present the thought of "one of modern China's most famous and prolific philosophers' (p. 185). In an odd oversight, the index lacks entries for Buddha, Confucius, Catholic, Islam, Judaism, or Protestantism. Metzger presents John Dunn, F.A. Hayek, John Rawls, and Richard Rorty as the spectrum of modern Western political thought. He apparently has never heard of Catholic Social Teaching or the role of Christians and Jews in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, or else assumes that "we" are not in the least interested in them. Now that China is uplifting Confucianism and extolling the positive contribution of religions in creating a harmonious society, this is a serious omission. The power of religious hope to motivate people to struggle for a better society is worth another long book in itself.

The glossary and index contains about 300 to 400 italicized phrases and the corresponding Chinese characters, giving key terms in philosophy and political science from the Four Books through the beginning of the 21st Century. It contains enough material in itself for a graduate course.

The book is recommended as one attempt to bridge the gap between political thinkers on either side of the "Pacific Pond." In the light of this year's ongoing and escalating trade war between China and the USA, it is well worth reading.