

Review on a Guide to the Two Sources of Western Civilization

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Abstract: *As a PhD. of medieval history, Professor Mark Buck came to China in 2005 and taught courses on Western culture and languages. The teaching materials for all his courses were written by himself, including those for Greek Mythology and The Interpretation of the Bible, which were later collected and published as A Guide to the Two Sources of Western Civilization, a textbook for college students' cultural courses. This textbook not only shows us the author's learned knowledge and versatile interests in every area of Western culture, but also his eagerness as an educator to combine the argumentative way of thinking of the western education into his book, which distinguishes this textbook from all the others.*

Keywords: *Western Civilization, Greek Mythology, Allusions, Argumentative Thinking*

1. Introduction

Professor Mark Buck came to China to teach in the University of Science and Technology Beijing in 2005 when I had just transferred to the English department and therefore had the chance to become his student since then till 2010 when I graduated from there. The teaching materials for all his courses were written by himself and distributed to the students every time before he started his lecture. That is how the book in question came into being. A Guide to the Two Sources of Western Civilization is a collection of the teaching materials for two of his courses, The Greek Mythology and The Interpretation of the Holy Bible. It was first published by China Renmin University Press in 2015 in English form and then republished in 2018 in bilingual form with a Chinese translation by Professor Chen Hongwei, the Dean of School of Foreign Studies of University of Science and Technology Beijing, and myself.

The book consists of two parts which are divided into 20 chapters: the first part of 8 chapters is Greek myth and the second part of 12 chapters focuses on the interpretation of the stories and teachings in the Holy Bible; therefore it takes as its title "A Guide to the Two Sources of Western Civilization", which indicates that the Greek myth and the Holy Bible, in the eye of the author, are the two sources of today's Western Civilization.

Greek myths and the Bible are two keys to the gate of Western culture. As the author has pointed out in the preface, "Until recently the study of Greek and Roman culture, and of the classical languages of Greek and Latin in particular, was a major feature of western education. Until very recently too, most educated westerners had a fairly extensive knowledge of the Bible, as a result both of their education and of fairly widespread religious observance. So Western writers assumed a quite detailed knowledge of both Greek mythology and the Bible in everything they wrote. A working knowledge of these two very large areas is therefore a necessary key to understanding most Western literature and art." [1](p. i)

What makes Greek mythology one of the sources of Western civilization mainly lies in the fact that it led Greek culture into a golden age and pervaded into every corner of classical Greek civilization. The most important epics of ancient Greece written by Homer and Hesiod are based upon mythological stories. Almost all of the greatest Greek tragedies that have been passed down onto today's stage are adapted from Greek myths. Most of the important philosophical discussions and artistic compositions center on topics from Greek myths. "In the 4th century B.C., as a result of Alexander the Great's conquests, Greek became the main language of communication in the Jewish world." [2] (p. 146) The conquests of Alexander the Great introduced the age of Hellenization which made Greek culture the most popular culture in the classical age Roman Empire. "When the Romans conquered Greece, they adopted much of Greek culture. Indeed, the Roman poet Horace later wrote that 'Captive Greece took her rude conqueror captive'. The Romans adopted the whole system of religion of the Greek people, gave the Greek gods latin names, finished the epic story Homer had left unfinished, adapted the Greek plays, copied the Greek art, etc. Therefore, Greek culture monopolized Europe before the rise of Christianity.

The fact that the Christian culture of the Holy Bible dominated Europe for more than a thousand years of the Medieval age entitled the Bible to be one of the sources of Western civilization. “Constantine converted to Christianity in 312 but it was the emperor Theodosius who made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in 381.”[3] (p. 20) The conversion of these two emperors translated Christianity from a religion of the Jewish people into the religion of the whole empire that had extended itself into three continents, Europe, Africa and Asia, and had Mediterranean as its inland sea. Christianity borrowed enough power from the empire and soon got the upper hand of the Greek culture and became dominant during the Medieval age. Due to the exclusive monotheism of Christianity, Greek and Roman classical works were almost annihilated in the Medieval Europe. “It has been held that the powers of binding and loosing given by Jesus to Peter are the power to condemn people to damnation or to absolve them from their sins. The huge political and spiritual authority exercised by popes in medieval Europe on this interpretation. The pope as ‘vicar of Christ’ claimed superiority over all other rulers, lay or clerical. It was an authority which he was able to exercise in practice because of the huge Roman bureaucracy, the taxes he was able to collect and the jurisdiction he was able to exercise over most of Europe until the 16th century Reformation.”[4] (p. 420) The conquest of the Byzantine Empire in the mid-15th century brought the light of Greek and Roman classics back to Europe.

To sum up, Greek myth is the basis of Greek culture which dominated Europe for a thousand years until defeated and taken over by the Christian culture of the Bible which became the only authority in political and religious life of the medieval Europe. Then the Renaissance period witnessed the return of Greek culture to confront the Hebrew culture again, and the two cultures formed the basis of today’s Western civilization and are therefore regarded as its two sources.

2. Artistic and Literary Allusions

Professor Buck is a learned scholar well equipped in many branches of art, which distinguishes his book as one that not only deals with Greek myth and the Bible themselves, but all the related artistic or literary works are included. He has mastered several European languages, including French, Latin and so on. He has widely read the Greek and Roman classical works as well as literary works from many other cultures. He plays piano, and was a singer in the choir of his local church as a child, which qualifies him a connoisseur of European classical music. He usually plays music in class for his students. He is quite familiar with western painting and has given lectures on different schools of painting.

Let’s take chapter seven “Myth and history” for an example. This chapter deals with the subject of the Trojan War. The author opens the chapter with Homer’s epics which have made the Trojan War immortal. Then he quotes the archaeological discoveries made in the 19th century by a German archaeologist to prove that the city Troy did exist in history and Homer’s epics are not entirely fictional but based upon some historical events. The whole story of the Trojan War follows. The war started with the Golden Apple. When Helen appears in the story, Professor Buck quotes the most famous saying about Helen from Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus*; the love story between Helen’s mother Leda and Zeus is one of Zeus’ famous love affairs and has been a popular subject for later generations of artists, including Da Vinci and Michelangelo.

The judgement of Paris was also a popular subject in the Renaissance period. Lucas Cranach the Elder painted at least four versions of the story in the early 16th century and Rubens painted at least three in the 17th. The sacrifice of Iphigenia was a favorite subject on the 18th century opera stage, among which the most famous was Gluck’s. When it comes to Hector’s death, the author introduces Shakespeare’s tragedy *Troilus and Cressida* which like Homer’s *Iliad* also ends with the Hector’s death. The famous scene that Laocoon warns the Trojans against the wooden horse is a very famous event in Virgil’s *Aeneid* and became the subject for one of the greatest sculptures in the world.

The fall of Troy reduces the women in the city into torture and misery; the fate of Andromache is the thematic event in Euripides’ and Racine’s plays; Hecuba appeared in *Hamlet*. The surviving Trojan prince Aeneas had a tragic love affair with Dido, the queen of Carthage, which was written into the greatest English opera *Dido and Aeneas* in the 17th century. Usually in a collection of Greek myths the Trojan war would be narrated as a tragic story and nothing more, but in Professor Buck’s work, not only is the story retold, all the literary, artistic, archaeological and philosophical achievements related to the story have been introduced to the readers, so that the readers would not only have a general idea as to how the war begins and ends, but also get a glimpse of the acceptance of the story by later generations.

Take the story of Prometheus as another example to show Professor Buck’s rich knowledge in different branches of liberal arts. Professor Buck begins the analysis with the Historian Hesiod who was

the first writer to tell the story of Prometheus. In Hesiod's narration, Zeus was righteous, and Prometheus caused split in the relationship between gods and man, which reduced man into misery. Then when Aeschylus retold the story in his great tragedy, Zeus became a tyrant and Prometheus became the benefactor of man and was punished by Zeus because of his fighting against the tyrannical king of gods and men. When it came to the time of Christianity, the story of Adam and Eve's eating from the forbidden tree was usually compared with the story of Prometheus stealing fire from the gods, because the fruit of the forbidden tree and the fire both represent knowledge and wisdom both the God in the Bible and the king of gods on Mt. Olympus, the image of tyrants, would not allow man to get possession of; and therefore Adam and Prometheus were treated as heroic images who fought against tyrannical monarchy and pursued wisdom and freedom.

When it came to the age of Romanticism, Prometheus was also a hero for all poets and musicians to sing praise of. Goethe and Shelley wrote plays and poetry upon the subject of Prometheus fighting against the tyrannical Zeus. Shelly even compared Prometheus to the image of Satan in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and regarded the two of them as great heroes who dared to challenge the rule of tyrants. Beethoven wrote a Prometheus overture. In the early 19th century, Karl Marx viewed Prometheus as an anti-religious hero, "Like Goethe and Shelley, he presented Prometheus as the liberator of man, but the liberation was principally from ignorance and religious belief." [5](p. 134) He even praised Prometheus to be "the most eminent saint and martyr in the philosophical calendar." [6](p. 134) Sigmund Freud saw Oedipus Complex in Prometheus, "Prometheus was the jealous son following through his Oedipal jealousy of Zeus, here regarded as his father, by stealing the gift of fire from him. Alternatively, fire represents sexual drive and Zeus is the representative of the 'id' or the part of the mind controlled by animal instincts such as sex and violence." [7] (p. 134) The same story about the same Prometheus inspired different interpretations in different ages. In order to better illustrate upon the story and the influence of Greek mythological stories, Professor Buck analyzes the story by quoting and referring to Greek historians, Romantic poets, Marxism and Freud's Psychoanalysis, which best demonstrates his remarkable learning and rich knowledge in different branches of liberal arts through western history. Such examples from the book are just too many to be fully listed here.

3. Argumentative Way of Thinking

Education signifies quite different meanings in the Eastern and Western tradition and takes quite different forms of teaching. In the traditional notion of education, to teach means to instruct students to recite and digest classical works by great saints and scholars in the past time, like those of Confucius and Mencius. So the most important task for students before the age of 13 had been to keep in mind all the Confucian classics. Although this traditional form of teaching was abolished in the early 20th century, it has been too deep-rooted in Chinese culture to be fully forgotten and its spirit of recitation has been carried on by later generations of educators. It has been quite another case in the tradition of western education and this is fully displayed in Plato's philosophical works. In most of Plato's works, education is executed by Socrates by means of conversations. And through conversations and discussions with the youths and students the teachers explored their potential as a learner to the full. This has laid an argumentative way of teaching in the West which has been carried on till today.

Since he is a very typical scholar the argumentative western education tradition has produced, Professor Buck usually encourages his students to be more argumentative and to challenge his views in class, and his typical western way of argumentative thinking pervades his teaching materials. In Chapter 9 when he talks about the God in the Old Testament of the Bible, he says, "The views of God we read in the Old Testament are often unattractive. Even believers should not feel bound to them. We should not abandon our duty to think and reason simply because of a traditional view or prejudice expressed a long time ago." [8] (p. 146) In Chapter 10 he challenges the belief of some believers that every word in the Bible is true, and proposes that "we should never abandon our critical faculties" [9] (p.158), and he further suggests a proper way to read and interpret the Bible, "We should regard the Bible as a text which needs to be explained in terms of the social and religious customs and beliefs of the period when it was written." [10] (p. 158)

His analysis of the fall of man is a good example to show his argumentative inclination in this book. In the story of the creation of man and woman, woman was created as a helper for man. And then it was the woman who first subdued to the temptation of the snake, ate from the forbidden tree and led to the fall of man the expulsion of man from the Garden of Eden. Then in the New Testament, Saint Paul referred to this event as an evidence and biblical foundation to prove that man is superior to woman and therefore a wife should submit herself to her husband just as the church has Jesus as its head, "A woman

should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.”[11] (p. 1040). This became a basis for the later patriarchal society in the West and led to the inequality between man and woman. Through Professor Buck’s analysis, the readers will not only see that it would be foolish to regard this inequality as divinely ordained, but also see clearly the limits of the biblical stories due to its formation of time, and better understand the origin of the inferiority of woman and the feminist movement in the West.

Then Professor Buck goes on to analyse the fall of man. In this story the most puzzling point comes from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. “We read that God made man ‘in his own image’. it is reasonable to assume that this means that He endowed Man with the dignity of freewill, and the responsibility that comes from freewill. That being the case, it seems reasonable to expect that God would wish Man to be fully aware, to be able to distinguish between Good and Evil. So why this restriction? It is a restriction most difficult to explain.”[12] (p. 166-168) He analyses this story from the perspective of the historical background. In that age when no idea of democracy existed, God was like a monarch that demanded complete obedience and devotion, as has been demonstrated in the ten commandments and all the other books of law.

Professor Buck puts the story in its historical context and proposes a much more reasonable explanation for today’s readers that such edict from God exposes obscurantism in the early stage of the Jewish history. To push the analysis one step further, he goes on to point out the perception of human nature revealed by this story, which lays a foundation for the Westerners’ basic understanding of human nature, “although man is not evil, is weak, foolish, fallible and easily tempted. He is often proud, selfish and disobedient when he should be humble, generous and cooperative.”[13](p. 168) He even points out the different perception of human nature of the easterners, “By contrast, in the East, generally speaking, there is a more positive and optimistic view of human nature as basically kind and good.”[14] (p. 168) Just as Mencius has pointed out in his works, “The tendency of man’s nature to good is like the tendency of water to flow downwards. There are none but have this tendency to good, just as all water flows downwards.”[15] (p. 471) His analysis and comparison provides an insightful guidance upon the reading of the Bible and casts fresh light upon the old stories in this ancient cannon.

Professor Buck continues to dig deeper into this story and further point out that the story of the fall of man has theological significance beyond the above mentioned psychological perception. “For Christians it provides the reason for the coming of Jesus.”[16](p. 170) He by the way draws a contrast between the image of Jesus Christ in the New Testament and the image of God in the Old Testament to display to the readers the evolution of the image of God in the Bible. He quotes a medieval theologian to illustrate upon the idea of incarnation of God and savior. By so doing he clarifies the connection between the Old and the New Testaments and the difference between Judaism and Christianity. Finally, in order to prove the far-reaching influence of this story in the western culture he gives a list of important artistic and literary works, including the paintings in the western churches, in the stained glasses of the windows of the Cathedrals, Michelangelo’s painting on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel, Milton’s epic *Paradise Lost*, William Blake’s illustrations, etc.

Professor Buck has given an insightful and argumentative analysis of the story of the fall of man in the Bible to inspire his students and readers to reflect upon many of the most significant subjects in Western Culture, like the origin of the inequality between man and woman, the different perceptions of human nature in the West and the East, the theological significance of the story, the connection between the Old and the New Testaments, the basic creed of Christianity, the influence of the story upon the development of western art and literature, etc.

4. Conclusion

With the acceleration of globalization, China is playing a more and more important role on the global stage and therefore drawing more and more attention from other countries, some even hostile and jealous. A very important step for China to play well this role and alleviate the hostility is to enhance mutual understanding between the East and the West, which requires not only more output of Chinese culture, but also deeper understanding of the Western culture. *A Guide to the Two Sources of Western Civilization* has not only provided a systematic introduction to the two foundations of the western culture, but by the way based upon these, offered a special perspective for the readers to have a glimpse of the significance and influence of these foundations; it is therefore a most readable and recommendable textbook for Chinese students and scholars who wish to acquire a basic understanding of the western culture and appreciate the most refined part of its civilization.

References

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- [11] *The NIV Textbook Bible, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984, 1040.*
- [15] *James Legge. The Four Books, Changsha: Hunan Press. 1996, 471.*