



Routledge Studies in Religion and Film

TRANSCENDENCE AND SPIRITUALITY IN CHINESE CINEMA

A THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

Kris H.K. Chong



Transcendence and Spirituality in Chinese Cinema

This book provides a framework by which a global audience might think theologically about contemporary films produced in mainland China by Chinese directors. Up to this point the academic discipline of Christian theology and film has focussed predominantly on Western cinema, and as a result, has missed out the potential insights offered by Chinese spirituality on film.

Mainland Chinese films, produced within the nation's social structure, offer an excellent *lingua franca* of China. Illuminating the spiritual imagination of Chinese filmmakers and their yearning for transcendence, the book uses Richard A. Blake's concept of *afterimage* to analyse the potential theological implications of their films. It then brings Jürgen Moltmann's "immanent-transcendence" and Robert K. Johnston's "God's wider Presence" into conversation with Confucianist and Daoist ideas of there being, spirituality-speaking, "More in Life than Meets the Eye" than simply material existence. This all combines to move beyond film and allow for a Western audience to gain a new perspective on Chinese culture and traditions. One that uses familiar Western terms, while avoiding the imposition of a Western mindset.

This is a new perspective on cinema, religion and Chinese culture that will be of keen interest to scholars of Religion and Film, Religious Studies, Theology, Sociology of Religion and Chinese Studies.

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In Loving memory and Celebration
of my parents,

Chong Hwa Long and Ong Kim Mui

whose lives epitomized sacrificial love: your love for me, a
child not of your own flesh and blood, continues to inspire
and sustain me.



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“But China obscures things,” you say; and I reply, “China obscures the issues, but there is light to be found. Look for it.”

—*Blaise Pascal, Pensees.*



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Acknowledgments

This book has its remote origins in Dr Robert K. Johnston's *Psalms for God's People* when I read it in a quiet library corner in Singapore more than a decade ago. The idea of faith and film in conversation captivated me. But it was years later before I could turn my fascination into an academic project under the tutelage of the witty scholar and theologian whose book started me on this path. That period of study was an especially formative time for me, not just in thinking about the kind of engagement between theology and cinema, but also in discovering how an engaged imagination could see the world through God's eyes. Rob's refreshing candor, intellectual energy, and generosity of spirit have given me space to develop my own theological voice. His influence on me remains unabated. I have benefitted much from his invigorating critique to the earlier drafts of this book and his unwavering belief in my project.

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Preface

Over the years, whenever I mention that my academic research is at the intersection of “Christian theology and film,” the reply I often hear is, “How do the two even relate?” Or, as a Taiwanese scholar once said to me: “What does film have in common with theology?”

On discovering that my specific focus is Chinese-language films produced by mainland China directors, the reaction is one of utter disbelief: “What possible religious themes can you find in (secular Chinese) films from a secular state?” Conversely, I have also heard my mainland Chinese friends muse in an exasperated tone: “The West does not understand Chinese films.” So how exactly are we to interpret locally produced Chinese films?

These two questions—of theology and (Chinese) films—while reflecting the most persistent misconceptions, are, if we were to carefully infer and analyse our way to a conclusion, really one and the same. Mainland Chinese films, produced within the parameters of the nation’s social structure, offer an excellent peek into the diverse historical and cultural lives of China. If anything, film, as visual representation of life and culture, is one of the most popular media from which such religious and theological themes emerge and are framed.

On a personal level, these questions made me pause frequently and reflect deeply: as an ethnic Chinese, though I was born and raised outside of China in a predominantly Westernised (or colonialised) society, I do read and write Mandarin with native fluency, and I also understand and speak several Chinese dialects. Nevertheless, I personally—and repeatedly—wrestled with the question, “What does it really mean to *be* Chinese?” Over the course of writing this book, I realised that, for me, the issue was less about whether I understand mainland Chinese films but, rather, *how* I might synergise various approaches with my mother tongue and cultural background to better appreciate these films.

Unsurprisingly, tracing the form and content of the divine Presence who is the “More” in Chinese tradition and ancient texts turns out to be a hugely significant task in discovering aspects of Chinese culture which I still do not know while deepening what I already know, and observe. As such, I seek primarily to give a contextual understanding to Chinese films, and religious

traditions as a conversation partner in the exploration of the confluence of Christian theology and cinema. For this enterprise to be successful, Christian theology must understand its role as an ecumenical dialogue partner in which the faith practices and stories of local communities come in the form of on-screen narratives. There is a sense in which this approach could also set forth a small step toward an inter-religious dialogue as a methodological frame for future interdisciplinary work particularly in the arts.

To this end, this book arises from the premise that mainland Chinese films must not be viewed simply as cultural artifacts of their time; rather, these films are the afterimages and reflections of, and influenced and shaped by, the mainland Chinese directors' religious traditions and childhood experiences. These afterimages are imprinted in the films, whether or not the directors had any intention of presenting them as such.

Invariably, afterimages emerge richly from the films in various forms: souls trapped in a regimented political system longing for freedom, articulations of Confucian principles, artistic representations of a Daoist worldview, existential agony through the years of Cultural Revolution, and so on. Making sense of these themes is a quest for wholeness and truth which ultimately, is making sense of our own life for all art is about revelation. And movies often open our eyes to see afterimages which otherwise would have been carelessly dismissed. When viewed through the lens of Christian theology, these Chinese films often serve as a paradigm for what counts as divine revelation—or the possibility of God's wider Presence.

Figuratively speaking, I took a close-up shot of the afterimages of Chinese filmmakers by first examining the notion of Chinese spiritual discernment, followed by how this presumably "secular" discernment is understood as "God" through Paul Tillich's framework of ultimate concern. Selected films are interpreted in light of these concepts. I then discussed Jürgen Moltmann's work on the Spirit and Robert K. Johnston's theological construct on Divine revelation or the indwelling presence of the Spirit as Immanent-transcendence (uppercase "I" indicating the Spirit's Divinity).

It must be emphasised that in exploring the underlying religious influences that shape Chinese culture, Confucianism and Daoism in particular, my purpose is not to determine whether Confucianism is a religion, or to question if China is a religious state. Prominent scholars in this field—C.K. Yang, Vincent Goossaert, Yang Fenggang, and John Lagerway, among others—have already dealt with these issues in their own extensive research. Rather, I seek to construct a religious and theological dialogue as a means to understanding mainland China's so-called secular films.

Thus the central focus and emphasis of this book is the salient aspects within Confucianism and Daoism that are identifiable in the afterimages of Chinese directors and their films. Again, it is not within the purview of my exploration to present any original research relating to the Chinese traditions of Confucianism and Daoism; instead, I draw heavily on the work of established scholars to frame my study. To this end, I employ and extend

Richard A. Blake's fascinating heuristic concept of "afterimage" to explain how centuries-old traditions and memories shape filmmakers' imaginations, as well as their artistic expressions. This approach differs from other theological approaches to film in that it delves into the experiences and ideologies that shape filmmakers by underlining the key aspects of Chinese culture and religious traditions.

In locating the spiritual discernment of the Chinese, I adopt Diane B. Obenchain's term "More in Life than Meets the Eye" (emphasis on the "More") to represent the notion of Transcendence/the Divine, rather than utilising the Judeo-Christian notion of "God." This befits the Chinese discernment that awakens one to something "more" in and around us, that which calls for our reverent attention. In discussing the discernment of the "More," I engage key concepts relating to Chinese religious traditions, such as *Tian* and *shen*, and their corollary meanings. These are concepts repeatedly found in the films discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, and which form the framework for my analysis.

At this point, it is necessary to clarify and pinpoint the meanings of the terms as they are used in this book, because generic terms such as "spirit," "spirituality," and "religion" bear different meanings in different academic disciplines. In Chinese culture, spirit or *shen* has several meanings, including: (1) a Being who draws the human person to go beyond the material and engage the transcendental in the manner that each person perceives as "god" or a Divine Being; (2) the *yin* and *yang* in the human psyche or *jing shen*, which the human person is capable of cultivating; and (3) when used in the plural sense, "spirits" denotes gods or spiritual powers, including spiritual entities associated with nature. "Spirits" can also refer to spirits of the deceased, such as ancestors. "Spiritual discernment" engages one, or all, of the above definitions. Additionally, "spirituality" can be used to refer to that which is related to effort in striving for moral perfection.

The term "religious traditions" in this book is used as a reference to what people hold to be of ultimate importance and even acknowledge as ultimate reality. "Religion," in short, refers to the Chinese person's beliefs and (ritualistic) practices in his or her commitment to a deity or god. It also embraces the meaning of organisational relationships that deal with ultimate matters of human life. Throughout the book, I draw on the definitions and insights of established scholars in the field of Chinese religion and religious traditions such as Julia Ching, Laurence Thompson, and Stephen Teiser.

Expanding the conversation on the notion of "More in Life than Meets the Eye," Chapter 2 places the concept within the larger framework of Paul Tillich's phenomenology of religion. I then move on to analyse the spiritual environment of Mao Zedong's political era and how it shaped filmmakers in that era. *The Blue Kite* (1993) and *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) illustrate how Tillich's construal offers a framework to interpret Chinese yearnings for Transcendence as "ultimate concern."