Globalizing Japanese Philosophy as an Academic Discipline
Global East Asia

Volume 6

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Japanese Philosophy and its New Students

Young students East and West opting for a specialization in philosophy today stand at a crossroads with a choice that few of their teachers ever faced, and fewer still have ever had to face: either they open up their studies to a world of philosophy wider than the traditional curriculum, with all the confusion and uncertainty that entails, or they turn their backs on it. For some years now, this has been a live and momentous option. Not too long from now, if I am not being overly optimistic, it may also be a forced option, so that we may say with William James: not to choose is to choose.

For departments of philosophy, this concern with nonwestern philosophy runs immediately into obstacles from customs prevailing in the academy. I shall restrict my remarks to East Asia, but similar circumstances exist in other parts of the world. Basically, these obstacles are of two kinds.

The first obstacle is resistance to the idea that there can even be any system of thought outside western intellectual history that merits the name “philosophy” in the strict sense of the word. The arguments in favor of this position are on shaky ground from the start inasmuch as they offend the spirit of philosophy as the critical search for wisdom wherever it is to be found. The assumption has been that the particular variety of philosophies acknowledged in the academies of the West should be allowed to define the field for the rest of the world. Reliance on that assumption has been eroded in the past fifty years and is now on its last legs. No culture, no religion, no philosophy can any longer presume to speak for the whole of humanity.

In defense of those who exclude philosophies other than the western, it must be said that, by and large, the countries of East Asia have not clearly defined their own philosophical traditions as such. The definition of philosophy that clings to the word invented by the Japanese Nishi Amane in 1874 and has been taken over by the neighboring countries of China and Korea has remained bound hand and foot to western philosophy. There have been three approaches to challenge that habit of thought.
The first approach is to locate the term *philosophia* in a broader class of intellectual enterprises, none of which can stand as a defining paradigm for the others. Raimon Panikkar’s “homeomorphic equivalents” (roughly the equivalent of Wittgenstein’s “family resemblances”) comes to mind. A generation ago he listed over 30 Sanskrit names and notions that could qualify as philosophy. Perhaps his criticism was made too early; perhaps the range of knowledge required to take over his suggestion was too great. In any case, the impact on western philosophers has been minimal.

A second way to challenge the western definition of philosophy has been to maintain the term, in a very general sense, and show that there similar traditions not rooted in the cultures of the Mediterranean basin. This has been the approach taken in Japan in recent years, although the Japanese themselves are divided on whether to consider the connection with western philosophy an essential ingredient in the definition.

A third approach is that taken by John Maraldo, Thomas Kasulis, and me in *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*. Our idea was to identify in Japanese intellectual history resources comparable to those that have informed and continue to inform western philosophy. This includes much that would not meet today’s academic standards but without which the philosophical tradition would be greatly impoverished. It is doubtful that the likes of Heraclitus, Epictetus, Plotinus, and perhaps even Plato, Erasmus, Voltaire, and Nietzsche would survive peer review in today’s philosophical journals, but it is hard to imagine western philosophy without them. The same may be said of the massive body of “philosophical” thought from premodern Japan. At least one has to admit that its merits as a philosophical resource deserve serious consideration.

Now a second and more reasonable obstacle to the embrace of nonwestern philosophies is that, simply put, *professors are at a loss how to direct students in philosophies in which they have not been trained or even know how to begin training themselves*. In the case of East Asia, the number and quality of translations from Korean, Japanese, and Chinese into European languages do not make matters any easier. True, over the past fifty years a wealth of material on a whole range of Asian philosophies has led to a revision of recent encyclopedias of philosophy, not to mention the respectable array of doctoral dissertations and monographs on particular thinkers. But the results are fragmentary and the audience small. In general, it is hard not to sympathize with teachers of philosophy who deal with the problem by encouraging their students to first gain a solid background in western thought and defer their study of Asian philosophies for future study under competent teachers.

The solution is not satisfactory, if for no other reason than that it begs the question. To answer a student’s question by substituting it with other questions that the teacher is qualified to answer is not the right lesson to teach at any point
in education, and certainly not in a field of study that prizes self-critical thought. What is more, such a response overlooks the fact that the basic linguistic skills needed to work seriously with nonwestern philosophy are less likely to be gained the longer they are postponed. Before suggesting a way out of this dilemma, we may first try to consider it from a different point of view.

No doubt, the inclusion of alternate paths to contemporary philosophy raises important questions about the accuracy of textual interpretations grounded in cultures and modes of thought foreign to those that produced those texts. Still, a closer look at just how this took place in Japan may help teachers reassess their uneasiness over the lack of linguistic and historical expertise for directing students interested in Asian philosophies.

To begin with, the great majority of Japanese engaged in western philosophy do not consciously incorporate Japanese premodern resources into their writings, despite the abiding influence of those resources on their own intellectual development. The fact is, without the Buddhist and Confucian canons and the varieties of intellectual currents they produced, without the Taoist classics and Shinto mythology, the nuances and tacit assumptions of Japanese logic and language would fall flat. Conversely, for the West, there is a vast body of religious, literary, and esoteric thought that has served as a valuable resource and, given its philosophical language, a depth of connotation hidden from the surface of the texts. The Bible, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Cervantes, and Proust, as well as the corpus of mystical, hermetic, alchemical, and proto-scientific thought have had a far greater influence on philosophical thought than academic philosophy ordinarily pays tribute to. There are of course exceptions on both sides, but these only serve to heighten awareness of what is lost in the carriage of philosophy across traditions.

In addition to the linguistic and textual problems of embracing radically different modes of thought, there is always a performative aspect to philosophical reasoning that makes it more like music than like literary criticism in the sense that it is only accessible through the praxis of interpretation. Simply to read the texts is to be tone-deaf, to focus on the lyrics and miss the melody. Where the tuning and the scales are unfamiliar, as they are in much of Japanese philosophy, the temptation to block them out is all the greater.

We seem to have strayed to the opposite corner of the argument for broadening the study of philosophy beyond the western heritage, but philosophy must find a way through this skepsis if it is to maintain its foundational commitment to think as critically, comprehensively, and intensively as possible. The only way to do this is to do it. Detention by methodological doubt is no longer enough of a reason not to engage. Had the acceptance of western philosophy in East Asia been stymied by the same apprehensions, we would not have the body of twentieth-century Japanese thought that has begun to capture the imagination of philos-
ophers in the West. Philosophers best honor those specialists in East Asian thought and literature who have acquired the linguistic skills and level of historical understanding to make a considerable body of work available in translation not by retreating from its “otherness” but by returning to the very naivete of apprenticeship that their education has shielded them from. Dialogue with the philosophies of the East needs to be approached as a voyage of discovery, not as an archaeological dig. Its primary virtue is not the prudence of the classifier but the daring of the adventurer—something that the great turning points in the history of western philosophy attest to again and again.

Post-colonial contemporary philosophy has labored for the past fifty years and more to deconstruct the hubris and Eurocentricism of “philosophy” and to disenchant us of its claims to universality. But there is a growing sense that the project has been idling and unproductive, that something more needs to be tried. Once the idols have been toppled, examining the pieces is just not that satisfying, as more and more of those standing at the frontiers of western philosophy have begun to feel intuitively. To judge from the many young students whom we met in the course of workshops and conferences organized in preparation for the Sourcebook, the enthusiasm for the philosophies of Japan and its East Asian neighbors is a sign that the time is ripe for giving different philosophies and different rationalities recognition at the curricular level. As we wait for a generation to be trained and take on positions in the academy that allow for institutional reform, there is much that teachers and students, as many as feel the urge, can undertake together to prepare the way.

The suggestion is not as foolhardy as it sounds. In fact, one might say that unless change begins from the bottom up, in the self-conscious naivete of adventure, no changes imposed at the organizational level are likely to take root. What is more, apprehensions about the cultural and linguistic differences, as important as they seem in the confrontation of European and Asian philosophies, are regularly transgressed on one’s home ground. The mooring of history and language to geographical stability easily creates the illusion of a primordial “sameness” that allows philosophical thought to jump from one age to another as easily as a frog hops across lily pads on the surface of a pond. The movement to understand ideas by clarifying the epistemic circumstances of their birth has introduced a certain suspicion towards appeals to a philosophia perennis, but in practice the philosopher who is not self-consciously engaged in clarifying one or the other aspect of the history of philosophy, regularly overlooks the epoch specificity of texts and authors cited. This makes it possible for the past to serve as a “resource” and inspiration for the present without constantly having to apologize for the fact that the past is in large part a foreign country.

Despite the cautions mentioned earlier, not all of Japanese philosophy, and perhaps none of it always, needs to be fenced off as “foreign” and “other.” There
are ideas of mind, body, temporality, and even interpersonal communication to be found in medieval Japanese thought will appear more accessible to the contemporary western mind than their counterparts in medieval scholasticism—and vice-versa for Japan. The geographic and cultural boundaries of Japan and of Europe are not sufficient to provide their respective traditions of thought with a stability that justifies keeping them at arm’s length one from the other. Language and social institutions are always too fluid, too much alive not to overflow their current identities in the attempt to understand what is radically “other.”

If there is one thing we learned through the preparation of the Sourcebook it is that descriptions of particularly “Japanese” aspects of language, art, and logic gain nothing important from attempts to prove that these elements are lacking in other cultures. Most of the time—perhaps all of the time—these arguments show a crippled understanding of non-Japanese philosophies, logics, and arts. There has to be a more acceptable way of making comparisons. It is one thing to say, “We cannot say X in other languages; our idea of Y is nowhere to be found in other cultures and this makes it valuable”; and quite another to say, “I simply do not know how to say X or how to find Y in any other intellectual tradition than my own. But if I could, or if someone could show me, then X and Y would be all the more valuable for it.”

These questions all carry over into the definition of philosophy. From the standpoint of modern Japan, at least four distinct senses of the word tetsugaku have been debated. John Maraldo has studied this in depth and his results woven into the Framework with which the Sourcebook opens. All four senses were stimulated by the encounter with non-Japanese traditions, both western and Asian. I summarize them here.

First is the study of western philosophy as it was received from abroad—not only its content but also its method of study. Nothing else was classified as “philosophy.” This is not the place to assess the results, but the fact that no major Japanese philosopher has ever been universally accepted in the West as part of that tradition is enough to suggest that the ideal was both misguided and self-deceiving.

In the second place, for the same reasons but at the other extreme of the spectrum, there are those who hold that only pre-modern Japanese thought and its East Asian sources can count as genuinely Japanese philosophy. Although the Sourcebook devoted considerable space to these resources, their relevance today cannot be isolated from advances made in philosophies of the West.

A third sense builds on an assumption that gained currency in Meiji Japan: wakon yōgaku 和魂洋学, Western learning with a Japanese soul. Often used as a defense mechanism, the truth is, it takes a practiced hand to identify the philosophical import of premodern writing and engage them in the light of modern philosophical terms and methods. Moreover, the venture always teeters on the
edge of a narrow precipice, one side falling into protectionism, the other into a headlong but unconscious appropriation of western thought. Those who have the skills to keep their balance and not lose touch with the fundamental philosophical vocation to critical thinking have been given a prominent place in the *Sourcebook*.

A fourth and final sense of *tetsugaku* is distinctively Japanese in construction but not in audience. Its markedly Japanese character is put at the service of a vision that rejects both colonial and counter-colonial forms of orientalism. Whatever singularity Japanese philosophy represents, it does not necessarily entail a slide into the vainglory of national pride. And yet, a critical awareness of the historical, cultural, and linguistic conditions that shape its thinking are a necessary condition for identifying original or creative contributions to philosophical thinking. This fourth sense is most clearly, but not exclusively, represented by the Kyoto school. At its best and at its worst, the writings of Nishida and his successors highlight the task, and are therefore given a large section of their own in the *Sourcebook*.

While respecting this description of what philosophy has meant, the editors hold out hope for a new definition that will allow Japanese philosophy to be a resource for the West as well. This is a task that only the new students of philosophy, in Japan, in its neighboring countries, and in the West, can bring to reality. We look ahead to the day when contributions to what we have no choice today but to call “Japanese philosophy” can transcend the land of their birth and be judged on their own merits—the day when the *Sourcebook* will be seen as a relic in the history of philosophy.

Meantime, scholars East and West specializing in Japanese philosophy need to broaden their view of the resources of the tradition as a whole. Those working with late twentieth-century thought, for example, may feel no immediate pressure to study neo-Confucian thought, but familiarity with the important changes that took place there during the Tokugawa era should alert them to aspects of current thought that would otherwise have gone unnoticed.

It was with these considerations in mind that the idea of producing a *Sourcebook* was born. In a word, we wanted to show the breath and length, the front and back of Japanese philosophy from its beginnings to the present day. We had no wish to interfere with the self-image Japan has of the way its own history of philosophy developed, or to tarnish its own image of that development. We wished only to gather resources into a single volume for readers who, from a different standpoint, want to learn from many examples of creative thinking in that history.

Obviously *learning philosophically* is not the same as learning about the facts of the history of philosophy. It is not just a matter of satisfying intellectual curiosity or expanding one’s range of knowledge. Philosophy’s way of learning is
to grope around beneath the text for assumptions, to compare, to appropriate, to carry the lamp of Diogenes between the lines into questions dark and impenetrable. The more we advanced, the more we realized that the image of Japanese philosophy in much of the West as “traditionalist” and “following the lead of precedence” is a groundless anachronism. If a Kant or a Hegel or a Heidegger were able to change the way we did philosophy, then so might a Dōgen, a Sorai, or a Nishida—if given a chance.

I repeat: this is not to devalue the “otherness” of the history of Japanese philosophy. As is the case with most of our own past, it must be allowed to retain its strangeness. This is all the more so when there are major differences of expression and construction involved in treating a language as different from Japanese as English is. We need texts that sound natural to the English ear, but never at the expense of allowing the challenge of otherness to shine through.

I do not mean that translation is merely a tolerable alternative to contact with the original texts. The fact is, Japanese philosophy must be translated if it is to interact fully with other philosophies, including those of the West. But translation is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it implies that the classical traditions of European and American philosophy can learn from Japan’s native philosophical tradition. On the other, it implies that Japanese philosophy can be used, and even have creative contributions made to it, by those not conversant in the original language. This is a harder pill to swallow, but once again the history of western philosophy bears it out: it is not the border lines between traditions that are primary, but the borderlands in whose overlap they become secondary. People can sit in Madrid or Paris comfortable with the claim that Catalan is a hybrid of French and Spanish, and the reason is: they have no idea what Catalan is. You have to see it in its living form to know how wrong the categorization is. It is in the borderlands that Japanese philosophy comes to light.

As Tom Kasulis is fond of saying, imagine if only those who could read Danish or Russian were qualified to comment on the thought of Kierkegaard or Dostoyevsky and advance ideas that remained undeveloped in their thought. Then, too, there are important studies done on William James or Henri Bergson by people outside the cultural-linguistic frames within which they wrote who have at best a dim appreciation of their use of language. Crudely put, western philosophy would be much the poorer if we applied the same criteria to it that have kept the development of Japanese philosophy locked into its own language and culture. If there is much lost in even the best translation, the gains are often more than compensation.

It might seem that referring to our anthology of Japanese philosophy as a “sourcebook” evades the problem of defining philosophy. It is and it is not. The editors are of one mind that the right to define what is philosophy and what is not does not rest with any one tradition, any more than the right to define what is
rational can be claimed by any particular culture and imposed on any other. But just what makes one work philosophical and another not is another question. We have assumed a rather generous approach, in light of the great variety of the western philosophical tradition, not confining ourselves to the stricter parameters of modern academized philosophy. But it is entirely possible that the range of our inclusion may help question the dismissal of some elements in the western tradition as “unphilosophical.” This is a problem I have not thought through well myself, odd as that may seem for an editor of a philosophical collection for a western audience. In any event, the apparent irony of not being able to define the central concept of our collection may be a sign of a new era in philosophy.

When the Sourcebook was published this past June, we heaved a collective sigh of relief. A project of more than half a million words and over 100 collaborators is exhausting. But in another sense, as editors, it has left us full of expectations. Not because of its reception; not because I think it will change anything in the world of philosophy. By its nature, the volume points beyond itself, a door to another reality. For a few months more we may forget the moon and fixate on the finger, but in our hearts we know that eventually, when people realize what that other reality is, they will find themselves unhappy with our resumes and selections.

Our expectations are of another sort. They focus not so much on the pages of this one book but on the process that led up to it and stands behind it. The Sourcebook is only one more symbol of important changes taking place in the history of philosophy. Those of us involved in the preparation of the book stepped into a stream already flowing and tried to pen a few words on the surface of the flowing water. To that larger history, even 1,360 pages is no more than a footnote. If collaborators in other Asian countries, of whom there are several representatives here today, can open a door to philosophy, and if our efforts and the efforts of all our collaborators can keep a foot in that door, then the philosophical heritages of the West and of East Asia will be better off for the intrusion.

For a century and more, western scholars who have made a home in Japan and Japanese scholars who have spent great parts of their lives in the West have clamored for the education of what Mori Ōgai called “two-legged scholars.” The curricula of our philosophical academies hobble along on crutches, unable to open their eyes to the self-evidence of what those voices are saying.

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