

<BOOK REVIEWS>Japanese Philosophy : A Sourcebook, by James W. Heisig, Thomas P. Kasulis and John C. Maraldo

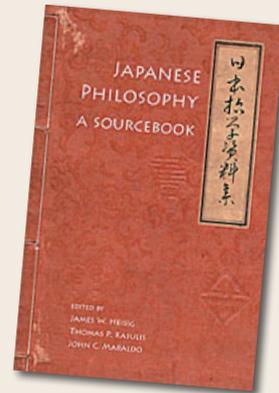
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Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook

**James W. Heisig, Thomas P. Kasulis and
John C. Maraldo**

University of Hawai'i Press, 2011
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The modern category “philosophy” was not introduced in Japan until the Meiji period. Accordingly, the choice made here to define medieval Buddhist devotional texts or Edo period proto-nationalist mythmaking as “philosophy” is by no means self-evident. At the very least, such a choice requires a concise working definition of “philosophy,” as well as clearly defined criteria for inclusion and exclusion. Unfortunately, in *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, such a definition and criteria are lacking. In their general introduction, the editors state that “philosophizing,” “the critical investigation of deeply perplexing questions,” “is a widespread and perhaps even universal phenomenon” (p. 17). However, the editors give no clues regarding their criteria for inclusion, nor do they acknowledge that “philosophy” is a historically constructed, normative category intertwined with academic and other power structures.

In any case, the editors’ understanding of “philosophy” does not correspond to the modern Japanese academic category *tetsugaku*. They have included many pre-modern texts not normally categorised as “philosophy” in Japan, excluding those modern philosophers not deemed “Japanese” enough. The underlying assumption is that it is possible to “generalize certain fundamental orientations as commonly or typically “Japanese”” (p. 21); that, in contrast to Western philosophy, Japanese philosophy “puts the emphasis on being organic, generative, allusive, relational, syncretic, aimed at contextual origins and underlying obscurities, and negation as a way of transforming perspective” (p. 23). This volume thus follows a classical Japan-West dichotomy, which omits modern Japanese philosophers as they “do not regularly analyze or even cite texts from *their own* tradition” (p. 19, my emphasis)—as if Japanese philosophers cannot lay claim to European traditions simply because of their nationality. Here “Japanese philosophy” is reified as a singular tradition with a unique essence diametrically opposed to “Western philosophy.” The possibility that the abstractions “Japan,” “Japanese” and “Western” may be ideal typical, ideologically charged constructions does not occur to the editors.

There is, nonetheless, no denying that this sourcebook represents a great collective achievement. It consists of more than 1300 pages of primary sources written by approximately 120 Japanese “philosophers,” translated and commented upon by over one hundred scholars. Included are works by such well-known thinkers as Kūkai, Nichiren, Dōgen, Shinran, Ogyū Sorai, Motoori Norinaga, Nishi Amane, Fukuzawa Yukichi,

Nishida Kitarō, Nishitani Keiji, Tanabe Hajime, Watsuji Tetsurō and Maruyama Masao. It also contains works by a large number of thinkers relatively unknown outside (and even inside) Japan. Some of their work is here available in English for the first time. Regardless of whether or not they count as “philosophy,” some of my personal discoveries included: a treatise on the spiritual ability of women by Zen monk Bankei Yōtaku; well-informed criticism on devotional practices and Shinto nationalist mythmaking by Edo period Confucian scholars Satō Naokata, Ishida Baigan and Tominaga Nakamoto; attempts to reconstruct Shinto as a modern national ideology by Ōkuni Takamasa and Orikuchi Shinobu; discussions on the relationship between “religion” and “philosophy,” and a project to construct a Temple of Philosophy by Inoue Enryō; Mutai Risaku’s social ontology, pacifism and “quest of a new humanism;” Christian philosophies of time, otherness and self-awareness by Hatano Seiichi and Yagi Seiichi; a rich philosophical essay on the topic of contingency by Kuki Shūzō; Imanishi Kinji’s ecological thought, which is similar to yet predates contemporary post-humanist thought by half a century; and last, but not least, Ōmori Shōzō’s deconstruction of established truths concerning “history” and “language.” Other readers will make other discoveries, but the bottom-line is that this work is extraordinarily rich, quantitatively as well as qualitatively. Anyone interested in the history of Japanese thought is likely to encounter any number of unfamiliar texts and authors.

The book is divided into two parts of unequal length. The first, “Traditions,” is by far the longest. It consists of “Buddhist Traditions,” “Confucian Traditions,” “Shinto and Native Studies” and “Modern Academic Philosophy.” The last of these is divided into three: “Beginnings, Definitions, Disputations,” “The Kyoto School” and “Twentieth-Century Philosophy.” Each section begins with a useful overview. This is a conventional categorisation model, but not entirely unproblematic, as many pre-modern intellectual developments cannot easily be categorised as “Buddhist,” “Shinto” or “Confucian.” What is missing from this volume are precisely those texts that fall between categories, such as esoteric medieval proto-Shinto texts.

The second part of the book is entitled “Additional Themes.” One is left with the unfortunate impression here that this serves as a “rest category” for texts not fitting elsewhere. “Culture and Identity” in particular is puzzling. It begins with a lengthy, essentialist yet fragmented introductory essay by Thomas Kasulis, which is followed by disparate texts that have little in common: Christian thought and wartime “overcoming modernity” discourse, for example. Equally fragmented is the chapter “Aesthetics,” comprising several short texts, medieval as well as modern, on various aspects of Japanese “arts.” By contrast, Oleg Benesch offers an excellent introductory essay on “Samurai Thought,” which shows convincingly that *bushidō* is, to a large extent, a modern romantic invention employed for ideological purposes. There is also a chapter entitled “Bioethics,” which focuses on the Japanese debate on brain death and organ transplants. The chapter cites opponents of organ transplants, but not its advocates, and rests on a simplistic East-West dichotomy. It is even suggested that the practice of donating organs is a product of “individualist values imported along with much of western culture” (p. 1242).

Finally, the sourcebook has a comparatively lengthy chapter on “Women Philosophers,” including texts by Yosano Akiko, Hiratsuka Raichō and Yamakawa Kikue. This was applauded by a previous reviewer as “truly a welcome addition to the grave lack of literature

on women thinkers in Japan.”¹ However, the very fact that these authors are set apart as “women” philosophers paradoxically confirms their inferior status within Japanese academia. (Consider the absurdity of a chapter on “men philosophers.”) The suggestion is that their gender, not the “philosophical” quality of their writings, explains their inclusion. One also wonders why the overview to this section is twenty three pages, while those of “Confucian Traditions” and “Shinto and Native Studies” are only nine pages each.

The quality of the translations in the volume is generally high, and most texts are very readable. However, there are inconsistencies in translation, which the editors should have noticed. For instance, the term *kami* has been left untranslated in some texts, while elsewhere it is translated as “gods” or “deities” seemingly randomly. Another inconsistency is the use of italics in primary sources. Usually, they are used for translators’ comments, but in the case of Motoori Norinaga (pp. 472–492), italics are suddenly used for citations in the original text. Such inconsistencies are confusing, and could easily have been prevented. Finally, one wonders how it is possible that in a text first published in 2000, Fujita Masakatsu could refer to a sourcebook published eleven years later (p. 994). Obviously, the translator/editor has added a sentence that was not present in the original, which raises questions regarding proper translation and reference practices.

In sum, this sourcebook has its problems. It rests on an outdated Japan-West dichotomy; the criteria for inclusion and exclusion are questionable; and inconsistencies and errors remain in the text. Nonetheless, this is a very rich collection, which features many Japanese texts available in English for the first time. Moreover, at 35 US dollars for over 1300 pages (paperback), it is very reasonably priced. It is a welcome addition to the bookshelf of any scholar or student interested in the history of Japanese thought.

Reviewed by Aike P. Rots

¹ Arisaka Yoko. “Review of *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*.” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 38:2 (2011), pp. 387–89.