FEATURE REVIEW

A New Book of Japanese Sources

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*Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook* is a monumental achievement that must have taken many years of thoughtful planning and execution by a fine group of editors: James W. Heisig, Thomas P. Kasulis, and John C. Maraldo. Offering well over a thousand pages of invaluable resources for researchers and teachers at a very reasonable retail price, this volume will undoubtedly serve as an outstanding sourcebook for all those interested in Japanese philosophy, as well as religious thought, social ideology, and artistic expressions stemming from the classical (Heian) and medieval (Kamakura) through the early modern (Tokugawa) and modern (Meiji and post-Meiji) periods. Key portions of some of the major writings by leading figures in Japanese culture have been compiled by a remarkably skilled team of translators; the list of those involved reads like a “who’s who” of the field (pp. xvi–xviii). In addition to the three main editors, who also contribute a number of the translations in addition to opening statements for various sections of the book, a few dozen carefully selected scholars participated in this comprehensive project, every one of whom is an expert in one or more fields and subfields of Japanese thought.

The translations included here have obviously been labored over and have been double-checked and cross-checked; they will be of great service in the classroom and consulted by research specialists for many years to come. Following an introductory essay, “Framework,” which lays out the aims, rationale, structure, and organization of the book, the materials on the major religious traditions cover about 550 pages, with the next section on Modern Academic Philosophy covering about 450 pages, and the final section on Additional Themes containing about 250 pages, followed by nearly 100 pages of Reference Material. Each section includes an “Overview,” or introductory discussion, with a short list of Suggested Further Readings, and every thinker cited is explained and featured with an image of their likeness. The entire set of the translations and reference materials has the potential to be read very carefully by a wide readership, and the book will take its place alongside a very small handful of similar volumes that have such breadth and scope of coverage.

The first main section of materials is presented according to the chronology of various traditions of religious philosophical thought, with about a half dozen or up to...
two or three times that number of representatives chosen to represent these schools of thought. This section starts with Buddhist thinkers who reflect more general or unaffiliated trends, ranging from Kūkai in the ninth century to Nakamura Hajime in the twentieth century, and also includes a unit on “Original Enlightenment Debates” extending from Saichō in the early Heian era to the recent Critical Buddhism methodological movement. Next is the section on Zen, beginning with Dōgen and Musó Sōseki of the Sōtō and Rinzai sects, respectively, from the early Kamakura era and extending to Suzuki Daisetz and Hisamatsu Shin’ichi. The section on Pure Land, which includes five thinkers, ranges from Hōnen and Shinran, the respective twelfth- and thirteenth-century founders of the Jōdo and Jōdo Shin sects, to the recent Yasuda Rijin. After this, the section on Confucianism, which includes the greatest number of thinkers—seventeen in all—deals largely with a Tokugawa-era phenomenon that starts at the end of the sixteenth century with Fujiwara Seika and continues until Ninomiya Sontoku in the late nineteenth century. This is followed by Shinto, which is also rooted in the Edo period and begins with Kamo no Mabuchi and Motoori Norinaga in the eighteenth century and concludes with Ueda Kenji in the twentieth century.

The category of modern academics is divided into three subsections. The first is “Beginnings, Definitions, Disputations,” which covers a handful of Meiji-era thinkers who helped develop the Japanese notion of what it means to construct philosophy in light of Western influences, such as Nishi Amane, Fukuzawa Yukichi, and Nakae Chōmin. The next division treats the “Kyoto School,” which still constitutes Japan’s single most innovative style of philosophy and includes about a dozen representatives beginning with the founding figures, Nishida Kitarō and Tanabe Hajime, and concluding with several current thinkers, such as Ueda Shizuteru and Ōhashi Ryōsuke. The last subsection is referred to as “Twentieth Century Philosophy,” and contains around two dozen thinkers ranging from Abe Jirō and Takahashi Satomi at the dawn of the twentieth century through Tosaka Jun, Lenaga Saburō, and Maruyama Masao to the recent Sakabe Megumi and current Fujita Masakatsu.

The final category of the book covers contemporary philosophy in terms of four themes. One is “Culture and Identity,” which focuses on issues of nationalism in relation to modernity/postmodernity in philosophical discussions during and after World War II, including the Chūkōron Discussions as well as the writings of Takeuchi Yoshimi and Karatani Kōjin. The area of “Samurai Thought” contains a well-written overview but, a bit strangely, no particular thinker such as Nitobe Inazō is featured. “Women Philosophers” includes three thinkers, Yosano Akiko, Hiratsuka Raichō, and Yamakawa Kikue, and the final division on Aesthetics has short pieces by a couple of dozen thinkers dealing with the concepts associated with the literary and fine arts, including such key notions stemming from the classical period as mono no aware, yūgen, and wabi.

The book also contains some incredibly useful reference materials, especially in the Glossary, Bibliography, Chronology, and Index, which make this volume a complete package for the scholar to be able to use readily. In general, the creators of Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook achieve just the right sense of balance, which is
one of the main goals they strive for (p. 22), in their selection of thinkers and in
determining the extent of the particular passages that can be accommodated in a
lengthy volume. The clear and systematic organization that is greatly enhanced by
the insightful comments in the historical overview as well as introductory remarks for
each section and thinker makes this a book that will hold great rewards for the deter-
mined reader.

One of the many treasures is the opening page (p. 1305) of the Thematic Index,
which is cross-referenced with the Glossary and provides an outline of the main
topics in Japanese philosophy, including Reality (Human and the World) as articu-
lated in the Traditions (Shinto, Buddhist, Confucian), which are engaged in theories
of Expressing Reality (through Language and the Arts) and Comprehending Reality
(through Studying and Knowing) that have practical implications for coming to terms
with the Communal World (in terms of Social, Political/Economic, Ethical, Religious/
Philosophical, and Historical dimensions).

However, the compelling quality and utility of this presentation ironically high-
lights one of the few shortcomings of the book, which I find in the “Framework,”
which attempts to reopen the issue of whether or not what has been produced in
Japan since the Heian period constitutes “philosophy” in a way that is related to the
Western discipline. As the essay points out, “non-Western philosophy” is generally
considered an oxymoron. Will this book change the minds of Western philosophers
that have been made up for decades, it seems, against the notion of including Japan
in the canon of philosophical works?

I fear not, in large part because the Japanese materials are so varied in terms of
including religious, mythical, literary, cultural, and social ideals and standpoints,
and, in most cases, are lacking in the kind of logical structure the West prefers. Also,
since each particular item of the translations is a rather short, abbreviated version of
a larger text, the sustained argumentation—logical or otherwise—that is sometimes
in the original does not always come through in the presentation here. In addition,
the comparison of Shōtoku as the first Japanese philosopher with Thales in early
Greek philosophy, which is made in two somewhat different ways (pp. 6 and 35), is
not necessarily appropriate in that the former builds upon religious ideals while the
goal of the latter is to dispense with and move beyond religiosity.

On the other hand, the good news regarding this issue is that whether or not the
reader buys the argument about “philosophy”—and I am sure that many will find this
fascinating and well-reasoned food for thought—does not really affect the overall
quality or value of the volume. This book provides a vast coverage of representative
texts related to philosophy seen in the broadest of senses that will be extremely useful
to anyone, including comparative and cross-cultural scholars, interested in Japanese
culture, history of ideas, or intellectual history in terms of their meaning and implica-
tions for contemporary thought.

Another minor concern involves some of the organization of the book. I feel that
a few of the names are out of place—for example, Karaki Junzō could well be listed
under “Buddhism” rather than “Zen,” Watsuji Tetsurō might work better in the
category of the “Kyoto School” rather than “Twentieth Century,” and both Ichikawa
Hakugen and Izutsu Toshihiko could be included in “Zen” instead of “Twentieth Century.” Also, while the reference materials at the end of the book are uniformly outstanding, the one area where there is a letdown is the “Suggested Further Readings” that appear following introductory lead-ins to the major sections. These invariably are too short in their listings, and often include some out-of-date references going back several decades that may be considered “standard” but are not necessarily helpful to the contemporary reader. For example, the list for “Buddhism” (p. 50) contains seven items that do not cover any topic past the thirteenth century, even though the section itself stretches into modern times, and the section on readings for “Zen” (p. 140) has seven listings, but five of these were originally published before 1990 and one is a monograph entirely on the topic of Chinese Chan.

Despite the few relatively slight drawbacks, I am confident that all readers of Japanese Philosophy will greatly benefit from and be gratified in finding authoritative versions of philosophical materials, offered in a creative, cross-thematic and historically based fashion. The reader may already be familiar with some of these resources, but may wish to reference or cite them anew, while other sections will provide original translations of philosophers with whom many readers may not yet be familiar or have not previously had an opportunity to reflect upon in depth or view in historical perspective. The Thematic Index is one of the excellent tools that will enable the reader to navigate a path through over twelve hundred years of philosophical writing in Japan.