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*Classical Indian Thought and the English Language:  
Perspectives and Problems* ed. by Mohini Mullick and Madhuri  
Santanam Sondhi (review)

Alessandro Graheli

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Where Allen's text does engage with other East Asian martial traditions, typically Judo, Aikido, or Karate-Do, it appears to do so on the assumption that the Chinese concepts in question remain unmodified by their introduction into a new cultural situation. For Allen's text to go further, he must recognize that the philosophical systems in question underwent changes to suit the needs of their new cultural situation. This point is most salient as Allen appears to recognize the cultural changes that, for example, allowed White Crane to intermix with the indigenous arts of the Ryukyu Islands to form Karate, yet this understanding does not fully extend to his understanding of philosophy.

Allen's text makes an excellent entry into a philosophical study of the Chinese martial arts and their philosophical origins, as well as providing the groundwork for the use of the philosophical study of the martial arts as a field of comparative philosophy. However, as a comprehensive examination of the Asian martial traditions and their philosophical presupposition, it should be understood that *Striking Beauty* is a philosophical look at the East Asian martial arts and their relation to Chinese philosophy.

Note

- 1 – Phillip Zarrilli, "Actualizing Power(s) and Crafting a Self in Kalaripayattu: A South Indian Martial Art and the Yoga and Ayurvedic Paradigms," *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* 3, no. 3 (1994).

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Reviewed by **Alessandro Graheli**

Institute for the Cultural and Intellectual History of Asia (IKGA)  
of the Austrian Academy of Sciences  
alessandro.graheli@oeaw.ac.at

*Classical Indian Thought and the English Language: Perspectives and Problems*, edited by Mohini Mullick and Madhuri Santanam Sondhi, contains the proceedings of the workshop "Rendering of the Categories of Classical Indian Thought in the English Language: Perspectives and Problems," held in New Delhi in December 2011. Of the ten papers included in this volume, those by Sudipta Kaviraj, S. N. Balaganadhara, and Claus Oetke concern methodological issues of broader application, so they will be reviewed here in greater detail.

Each paper is followed by the response of a discussant and by a debate in the form of selected questions and comments from the audience at the workshop. The most relevant points raised in these discussions will be recapitulated in the second part of this review, along with my own comments.

Sudipta Kaviraj begins by asking a general question: why should we read classical texts at all? He evaluates two distinct methods of relating this “we” to the “classical texts.” One is the hermeneutic method, which he takes in the sense of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics, and the other is the historical one, specifically the approach of Quentin Skinner and the Cambridge school. In Gadamer’s hermeneutics, Kaviraj explains, historicity is understood as a double historicity: the historical existence of the text and the historicity of us readers, and this view is contrasted with the contextualistic practice of the Cambridge school, which aims at reducing the impact of modern understandings on past events and discourses. Kaviraj takes the hermeneutic approach quite seriously, though he ultimately seems to favor the historical one (pp. 14–15). He thinks that Gadamer oversimplified “the nature of the historicity of texts by turning it into a two-language process,” a limitation that leads to a problem in the application of the hermeneutic method to “cultures of great actual continuity.” This happens because “sometimes it is impossible to read a text like the *Gītā* from a temporal distance,” since such a text is “mediated by intermediate interpretive texts or commentaries,” so much so that “the enterprise of ‘going back to the text itself’ . . . is a deliberately unnatural strategy” (p. 15).

Elaborating on the “we” of his original question, Kaviraj sees four possible types of interest in classical literature (pp. 27–28): an interest in “short” history, that is, in the modern reception of a given work; an interest in “long” history, back to the time when the original work was composed; an interest in philosophy, which does not necessarily need to be historical; and a pragmatic interest in some practical field such as *Āyurveda* or *Yoga*.

Kaviraj explains his distinction between “long” and “short” history by means of Gadamer’s notion of “effective history” (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), that is, the historian’s awareness that “although in a tradition of interpretation of past texts some earlier cultures might not be directly used by current interpreters, the effects of their prior interpretations still remain effective” (p. 22). In long history the genealogical chains behind historical events are taken into consideration, while in short history the present events are connected just with the immediately preceding stage (p. 23). Thus, the concept of continuity or rupture of a tradition becomes a matter of subjective awareness of the historian, rather than an objective event.

Kaviraj also proposes a strategy to counter the decline of Sanskrit knowledge by making it more accessible. To do this one needs to bypass “the linguistic constraint,” that is, to disconnect “the content of the knowledge from the language in which it is stored” (p. 32), just as it has been done with the original Greek of Aristotle or the philosophical German of Hegel. Lastly, he advocates an interdisciplinary conversation by which traditional Sanskrit scholars could learn from social scientists “why the world on which they work became so distanced within their own culture,” while social scientists could learn from Sanskrit scholars about the most important contents of Sanskrit texts that need to be saved from extinction.

In the second contribution, S. N. Balagangadhara stresses the differences among Western and the Indian cultures, while advocating a new method of comparative research. His lengthy essay is segmented in six parts. In the first part he discusses the

predicament of being an Indian social scientist who uses theories produced in the Orientalistic West. Social sciences, he argues, should be “decolonized.” In the second part he suggests two possible ways of rectifying the Orientalistic bias, either by means of a better, non-Orientalistic description of non-Western cultures, or by a comparative method that could provide a context for a possible dialogue between Western and non-Western cultures. However, since the social sciences are themselves a product of Orientalistic bias, the first way is not feasible, so the comparative method necessarily needs to be adopted. Such a method should aim at looking at non-Western cultures as “possible alternatives to the Western form of life” (p. 68), thus discarding the idea that Western culture is superior and reinstating the needed balance for a true dialogue.

In the third part he outlines three “dimensions” of the reinstatement of such a balance: first, one should contest colonial descriptions of non-Western cultures (p. 69); second, one should clear the picture of prejudices such as the notion that India is “corrupted, caste-ridden, immoral, and so on” (pp. 70–71); third, one should examine the Orientalistic view from the perspective of meta-sciences such as sociology and history of science.

In the fourth part the general principle that “to understand Western culture, we need to study how the West has described other cultures” (p. 82) is applied to the Orientalistic views about religion and ethics in India. In the fifth part Balagangadhara focuses on the absence of Indian descriptions about “the others and the cultural world,” selecting three areas of such an absence: religion, ethics, and the social system. For instance, a proof of the absence of religion in India is that if there were religion in India “one would expect a huge volume of literature regarding religion . . . and even more literature in theology. Yet there is hardly any theology in India . . . and there is hardly any explicit reflection on the nature of religion” (p. 89).

In the sixth part, he further qualifies his comparative method as an application of “critique,” taken in a Kantian sense. Specifically, Balagangadhara understands “critique” as reasoning about “a relationship between two succeeding theories: it is a relational predicate that applies to a predecessor theory and to a successor theory” (p. 95). In sum, his comparative method involves “a critique of Orientalism and the contemporary social sciences that are influenced by the Orientalist theorizing” (p. 96).

In the third contribution to the volume, Claus Oetke presents the thesis that “there are no problems of either *translation* or *assessment* which are specific to interchanges between Western and non-Western” (p. 125; emphasis mine). “Translation” is nothing but rephrasing, that is, “expressing thought by the use of formulations which differ from those originally employed,” though in a different language (p. 126). “Assessment” refers to the judgment of a thought expressed in words; for example, “it is false that Vienna is the capital of Germany” is an assessment of the sentence “Vienna is the capital of Germany” (p. 126). Oetke examines possible translation issues and concludes that the types of problems encountered while translating from one Western language to another Western language are not different from those encountered while translating from a non-Western language to a Western language.

Devices such as borrowing, calque, transposition, and modulation, used to solve problems of non-equivalence between two Western languages, are also routinely used while translating from non-Western languages. Similarly, there are no specific characteristics in the assessment of thoughts related to a non-Western culture by means of a Western language; for example, the assessment of a statement such as “Patañjali’s Mahābhāṣya was composed in the second century B.C.E.” does not differ from that of “Aristotle lived from 384–322 B.C.E.”: both these statements are, quite simply, either true or false. Furthermore, the interpreter’s spatial or chronological proximity to the interpreted culture “does not guarantee homogeneity in relevant respects.” Therefore, it is not the case that “thoughts in foreign cultures have to be interpreted ‘in their own terms’” (pp. 132–133). Oetke’s conclusion is that “for an assessment of traditions of thought comprehensiveness of the scope of investigation is more important than the suitability of conventional technical terms” (p. 139).

The other contributions deal with narrower topics. D. Prahlada Char discusses some parameters for translating Sanskrit philosophical texts. He writes that the ideal translator should have a “good command” of English, “much more command” of Sanskrit, and “a clear awareness of the exact stand of the philosophical school” (p. 106). After criticizing a few cases of mistranslations of Navya-Nyāya terms, he wonders whether “a descriptive phrase should be considered a translation,” taking as an example the rendering of *upādhi* by the phrase “inferential undercutting condition,” as proposed by Stephen Phillips. Prahlada Char rhetorically asks whether it would be legitimate to render the word *pācaka* as “a person who performs an act of cooking,” rather than simply as “cook” (p. 113).

Vivek Dhareshwar explains his vision of Gandhian philosophy and proposes its application to what he sees as the present predicament of the enslavement of Indians.

P. K. Mukhopadhyay argues that intercultural translation is a precious tool to “enrich our understanding and appreciation of our own as well as of alien culture(s)” (p. 215), and that before translating “we need to carefully understand first the people and the culture and then the fundamental categories we seek to translate” (p. 217). Mukhopadhyay’s conclusion is that it is impossible “to render the categories of Indian moral thinking” into English (p. 226), and that “we should go for intercultural communication rather than direct translation of expressions of one culture in the language of a different culture” (p. 226).

Aloka Parashar Sen documents the history of the term “caste” in relation to *varṇa* and *jāti*, which began from the sixteenth century and continued throughout colonial times. Her conclusion is that “it is important for us to recognize . . . that caste had been re-invented and re-incarnated to provide intellectual justifications for its perpetuation in the colonial context” (p. 265).

K. D. Tripathi maintains that the very issue of understanding classical Indian thought in the English medium is important because “the West obliges us to study India” (p. 271), but “had we been familiar with our own thought [and] language . . . we could have approached non-Indian traditions with the insights available from our own” (p. 272). Tripathi notices how Sanskrit texts were in the past translated “in a more congenial and liberal atmosphere,” and he cites renderings of Indian ideas in

languages such as Syriac, Arabic, Tibetan, Chinese, Persian, and Greek (p. 273). Therefore, he argues, “the question of intentionality is foremost” (p. 273).

Wagish Shukla builds a narrative around the performative aspect of language in India. He argues for the primacy of writing over speaking in India, on the evidence of the tantric works *Śāradātilaka* (ca. eleventh century) and *Yoginīhṛdaya* (ca. thirteenth century).

In the tenth and final paper, Ramkrishna Bhattacharya traces a brief history of materialistic traditions in India, discussing in particular some sources for Lokāyatas and Cārvākas, and whether or not Jayaraśi can be considered a materialist.

A discussant’s response, along with some questions and answers, is appended to each essay. The most heated debates are those generated by the contributions of Kaviraj, Balagangadhara, and Oetke. Kaviraj’s main point, the distinction between the hermeneutic and historical approaches, is ignored in the comments to his paper, except for Mukhopadhyaya’s, who refers to this distinction when he observes that the ideal interpreter of philosophy is quite different from the ideal researcher of history. Mukhopadhyaya argues that while the former must be interested in the theory he is interpreting, the latter needs to be a neutral figure. Here I would add that Gadamer’s point is exactly that even the historian can never be a neutral figure, since his perspective is also an effect of history. Balagangadhara agrees with Kaviraj about the importance of an interaction among social scientists and Sanskrit scholars, but he also warns that Sanskrit scholars, along with their knowledge, should not be trivialized as native informants useful to anthropologists.

In his paper, Balagangadhara stresses how it is impossible to understand Indian thought from the Western perspective, but that one needs to understand Western theories in order to emancipate oneself from the Orientalistic discourse. Balagangadhara’s discussant, Manindra Thakur, aptly wonders whether an Indian social scientist could ever fully understand Hegel or Marx, perhaps spotting the weakness of Balagangadhara’s program. In addition, I would argue that if a Westerner cannot understand India because of cultural incompatibility, why, then, should an Indian be able to understand the West? If the assumption were that the social scientist needs to be fully merged and well versed in both cultures, the method would then be feasible only for rare and exceptional scholars. And I find odd Balagangadhara’s emphatic argument that there has been “hardly any theology in India,” considering, for example, the vast Vedānta literature and the traditions of medieval theistic schools, not to speak of Naiyāyikas such as Udayana or Bhaṭṭa Jayanta.

Oetke’s claim was that there is no peculiar India-West translation issue, because any translation problem can be tackled with the usual techniques. In a lengthy response to Oetke, Balagangadhara tries to prove that there are, indeed, “interesting and important problems which arise from the interaction between Indian and Western cultures” (p. 155). Oetke reiterates that the main problem of translation is one of background knowledge and that the problems ensuing while translating Indian sources are the same encountered with Greek or Roman ones. To this, Balagangadhara further replies that the West misunderstands ancient Greece and Rome the same as it misunderstands India, because the Indian culture is a “pagan” culture, just like

the Greek and the Roman ones. This debate clarifies Balagangadhara's perspective of his notion of "West": Western culture is a "religious" one in the sense that "Western Civilization is Christian Civilization" (p. 162). Here, with Oetke, I am quite uncomfortable with the Western/Christian label generically attached to non-Indian observers.

In response to Pahlada Char's paper, Kaviraj notices the tension between correctness and felicity in translations; he also suggests that, since no translation is perfect, one should see it as a perfectible process, rather than an event that is either right or wrong. Kaviraj's points are agreed to and corroborated by Pahlada Char, Balagangadhara, and Mukhopadhyaya. I found particularly interesting Pahlada Char's reflection about the use of paraphrases and definitions to translate technical terms, because a hallmark of a good philosophical translator is the ability to identify the relevant technical terms and to find a middle path between the dangers of over-complicating by paraphrases or banalizing by vague or opaque equivalents. But the choice of the best English equivalents—and this is something that Pahlada Char seems to underestimate—also depends on the translator's awareness of the philosophical history of those very English terms.

In his paper Mukhopadhyaya advocates an intercultural communication while showing skepticism about the possibility of English translations of Indian texts. His discussant, Purushottama Aggarwal, asks whether it is possible to develop translation as an exercise of dialogue, rather than domination. Oetke suggests that it is better to distinguish two possible senses of "domination," the stronger sense of "ruling" and the weaker one of "prevalent," and Kaviraj adds that today's English is not exactly a ruler's language, but rather a prevalent one.

The remaining papers are followed by short and less interesting debates, which do not need to be discussed here.

In conclusion, the reader should be warned that this book specifically and explicitly addresses an Indian audience, as in the original proposal of the workshop: "the problem [of translation] becomes acute when we are dealing with vocabularies of long standing belonging to ancient cultures. . . . Despite this, not nearly enough attention has been paid in this country to the dangers and pitfalls of rendering ancient and not so ancient Indian texts . . . in the English language" (Introduction, p. 1). A broader perspective could easily have been adopted in the printed proceedings, with obvious advantages for dissemination and more opportunities for dialogue. In this respect the most productive contribution remains Kaviraj's.

In such a book the unqualified use of the crucial terms "West" and "Western" for everything non-Indian seems to me a superficial generalization, not different from the generalizations of some Orientalists who can rightly be accused of having neglected the rich variety of cultural and philosophical views in the history of India. Since the cultural distance is a recurring theme in most essays, it should be clear to everyone that, say, a South American or a Japanese scholar is not necessarily closer to a German than to an Indian.

A shared concern throughout the volume is the decline of traditional Sanskrit knowledge in India, and an increase of English translations is seen as the solution.

There is, however, a latent contradiction in upholding the English medium as a means of preservation, while criticizing the bias of the so-called Western culture at the same time, since it is difficult to see how one could divest the English language of its cultural legacy. Balagangadhara's strategy to decolonize the social sciences—which also means decolonizing the English language used in the social sciences—might be intended as a partial solution to this contradiction. Such an operation, however, requires a thorough immersion in both the European and the Indian languages, history, and milieu, which is certainly rare in present-day scholarship both in India and elsewhere. Therefore, if intended as a scientific method—that is, as a social enterprise, with shared hypotheses, experiments, iterations, confirmations, and peer review—Balagangadhara's "comparative method" is hardly a method, but rather the work of geniuses.

An issue raised in the book is the misinterpretation of the Indian heritage by Western scholars. This theme surfaces again and again, particularly in the essays by Balagangadhara, Dhareshwar, Prahlada Char, Tripathi, and Shukla. Except for Balagangadhara, however, these authors do not mention the specular difficulty of accessing the non-Indian culture by Indians. Consequently, the obvious solution of an interaction between scholars of diverse competences is not advocated anywhere in the volume. It is unfortunate, because this would have been a good occasion to build bridges between traditional scholars and academics, and to emphasize the need of international and intercultural cooperation.

*Philosophical Perspectives on Modern Qur'anic Exegesis: Key Paradigms and Concepts.* By Massimo Campanini. Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2016. Pp. viii + 154. Paper \$29.95, ISBN 978-1-78179-231-5.

Reviewed by **Oliver Leaman**  
University of Kentucky  
oleaman@uky.edu

*Philosophical Perspectives on Modern Qur'anic Exegesis: Key Paradigms and Concepts*, by Massimo Campanini, is a very interesting book and actually quite important in signaling the arrival of philosophy in modern times as part of Qur'anic studies. In the past the discipline has tended to be on the outskirts of the study of the religion of Islam and its Book, but in recent years philosophy has crept closer and closer to the mainstream discussion of the Qur'an. Campanini has made a real contribution not only to our understanding of the Book but also to how to go about studying it.

Like many good reads it has heroes and villains, and in the former camp are Nasr Abu Zayd and the school of Fazlur Rahman, however they are labeled, while the enemy is unsurprisingly those who fail to see the relevance of philosophy to the understanding of the Qur'an. A point that Campanini could have made more of is that the latter group, who are hostile to philosophy, base their position on the philosophical argument that philosophy can make no contribution to the understanding of