

# JAPANESE PHILOSOPHY BETWEEN EUROCENTRISM AND WORLD PHILOSOPHY

*The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy* by Bret W. Davis (ed.) (Oxford University Press, 2022 in paperback)  
**reviewed by Leon Krings & Francesca Greco**

The *Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy* is an impressive compendium of scholarship on Japanese philosophy consisting of 36 chapters and covering more than 750 pages. 37 international researchers contributed chapters under the direction of Bret W. Davis (Loyola University Maryland). The chapters are divided into five thematic sections, mostly organized according to different intellectual and spiritual traditions: “Shintō and the Synthetic Nature of Japanese Philosophical Thought” (about 140 pages), “Philosophies of Japanese Buddhism” (about 140 pages), “Philosophies of Japanese Confucianism and Bushidō” (about 60 pages), “Modern Japanese Philosophies” (more than 300 pages), and the thematically diverse section “Pervasive Topics in Japanese Philosophical Thoughts” (about 120 pages) which covers questions of language, freedom, ethics, aesthetics, and cultural identity. Because of the limited space available for the printed version of this review [a longer version will soon be available online – ed.], we will focus on the overall conception of the volume and the question of what Japanese philosophy is as presented in the introduction and the section on modern philosophies.

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In his introduction to the volume, editor Bret W. Davis convincingly argues that for traditions such as Japanese philosophy to take part in a global process of philosophical reflection, we need a thorough dismantling of the philosophical “Euromonopolism” (18) prevalent not only in the West, but also in Japan itself, and a “robust philosophical pluralism” (20). This does not necessarily mean that any form of Japanese thought can be labeled as “philosophy,” but rather that we can and should “include a wide range of ‘sources of philosophy’ without committing to or referring to all these sources as themselves philosophy” (21), thus avoiding “a hardened relativism that precludes ... any meaningful dialogue and mutual exchange” (23).

Davis goes through a range of possible interpretations of what Japanese Philosophy is and can be in order to justify his own selection of themes for the *Handbook*. In an interesting sub-section of the introduction (42–45), he refers to a controversy between John C. Maraldo and Thomas Kasulis, two of the three editors of the *Sourcebook of Japanese Philosophy* (an important point of reference for Davis), to show how there is an ongoing debate – even among established scholars of Japanese

philosophy – on whether pre-modern Japanese traditions should be understood as philosophies in their own right or as mere reconstructions or projections based on Western philosophy. Regarding this question, Maraldo proposes four possible senses of “Japanese philosophy”: (1) Western philosophy as it happens to be practiced by Japanese scholars; (2) traditional Japanese thought (Confucian, Nativist, Buddhist, etc.) as it was formulated prior to the introduction of Western philosophy; (3) a form of inquiry which has methods and themes that are Western in origin but which can be applied to pre-modern and pre-Westernized Japanese thinking; and (4) a kind of thought that has “a distinctive eastern or Japanese originality or character.”

Davis agrees with Maraldo in that the first two definitions, understood in isolation of the others, are unduly restrictive and that the fourth tends to enable an inverted Orientalism which hypostasizes an essence of Japanese thinking and thereby spawns so-called “theories of Japanese uniqueness” (*nihonjin-ron* 日本人論). Yet Davis seems to be cautious in affirming Maraldo’s claim that the third definition is the most viable option because he sees some merit in the second and fourth definitions. In reference to the fourth definition, for example, Davis argues that an assumption of uniqueness in connection to Japanese philosophy is not necessarily problematic in itself, but only if it is presented with an imperialistic or orientalist attitude. Asserting the uniqueness of Japanese philosophy, and thus putting it into a dialogue (or better: polylogue) with other equally unique local philosophies, seems to be a valuable approach for Davis, making it desirable “to have at least some artists, authors, and philosophers cultivate and contribute the best of what their respective traditions have to offer, just as we want others to cross borders, facilitate dialogue, and creatively cross-pollinate” (44–45).

The critical dialogue with Maraldo prompts Davis to present his own stance on the philosophical significance of pre-modern Japanese thought, and maybe even non-Western philosophy in general:

[W]hile Maraldo is certainly right to point out that to speak of pre-Meiji discourses as ‘philosophy’ or ‘*tetsugaku*’ is to bring them into an originally Occidental framework, it is possible to do so in such a way that those discourses are allowed to exert a counter-effect (what Nishida would call a

‘counter-determination,’ *gyaku-gentei* 逆限定) on the framework itself. A properly hermeneutical encounter is always, after all, a two-way street. (45)

Davis’ approach seems to be especially useful if put into the dynamic framework of an intercultural polylogue with a multitude of cross-pollinating local philosophies, each with their own respective forms of unique thought patterns and creative possibilities. In this way, the assumption of “a distinctive eastern or Japanese originality or character” of Japanese philosophy could avoid an essentialist Orientalism and actually have a positive, fertilizing effect on the broader landscape of cross-cultural philosophizing.

## A PHILOSOPHICAL ARGUMENT OR MODE OF THOUGHT CAN DRAW ON A SET OF CULTURALLY SPECIFIC IDEAS WHILE AT THE SAME TIME AIMING AT CROSS-CULTURAL OR UNIVERSAL INSIGHTS

Approaching the question of what the specificity and uniqueness of *Japanese* philosophy might consist in, Davis summarizes some of the generalizations of Japanese philosophy found in the *Sourcebook*, such as a preference for internal rather than external relations and for argumentation by relegation instead of refutation (i.e. accepting opposite standpoints as true but only as part of a wider perspective). He continues to add his own list of generalizations:

Japanese philosophies criticize and/or provide alternatives to ontological and epistemological subject-object dualisms, view human beings as intimately related with one another and with the natural world, and espouse process rather than substance ontologies. (46)

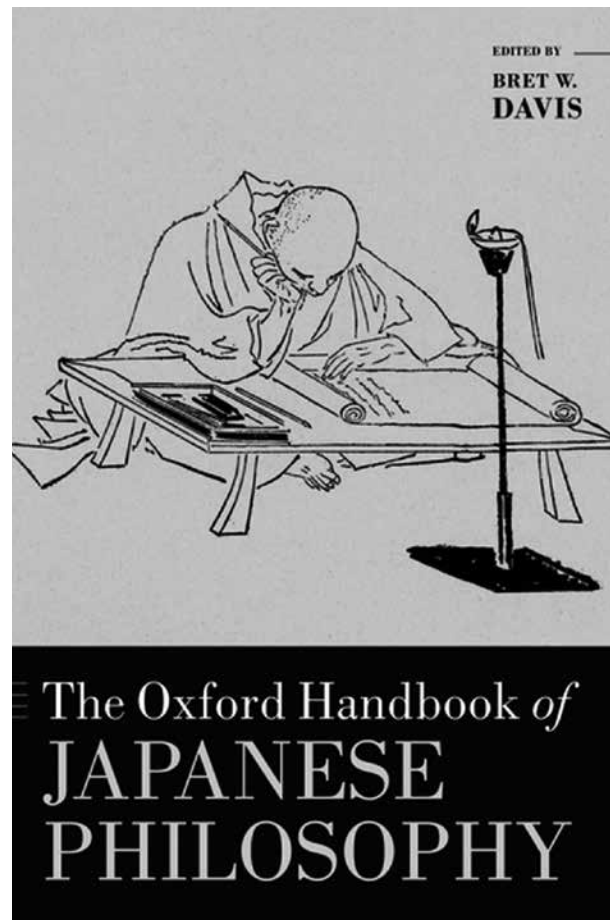
One could argue that some of the characterizations given by Davis and in the *Sourcebook* – like the

tendency towards relational and processual modes of thought – tend to be brought up not only by scholars of Japanese philosophy, but also by those of other non-Western traditions like African, South-American, or Amerindian philosophies. They tend to construct non-Western modes of thought as the mere “Other” of Western philosophy, as a mere negation of everything characteristic of dominant Western modes of thought. This othering of everything non-Western under a common umbrella tends to blind us to the multi-polar spectrum of differences between the infinitely diverse ways of philosophizing practiced in a global perspective. Other characterizations, and specifically Japanese concepts mentioned by Davis, like that of Nishida’s “immanent transcendence,” (*naizaiteki chōetsu* 内在的超越, 46) seem to be at least integrative of Western thought patterns and therefore point towards the possibility of more comprehensive frameworks beyond East-West and South-North dichotomies. This serves to highlight the need for more detailed, more pluralistic forms of dialogue, not only between East and West or South and North, but also between South and South, North and North, East and East, West and North, South and East, etc., and all the manifold regionalities in-between which fall through the cracks of any attempt at a global taxonomy.

Davis defines Japanese philosophy as “any rigorous reflection on fundamental questions that draws sufficiently and significantly on the intellectual, linguistic, cultural, religious, literary, and artistic sources of the Japanese tradition” (60), and contrasts it with “philosophy *in* Japan,” a concept that tends to ignore distinctively Japanese modes of thought and confines itself to a merely geographical understanding of Japan and a Western conception of philosophy. The latter conflates “philosophy” with “Western philosophy” and interprets it as a more or less universal mode of thought that merely happens to be done in Japan, without any major contribution from culturally and linguistically specific contexts. Davis criticizes Steineck, Lange, and Kaufmann, the editors of the German anthology *Begriff und Bild der modernen japanischen Philosophie* (2014), for painting distinctively “Japanese philosophies’ with the broad polemical brush of ethnocentric Japanism” (59, footnote) and for underestimating the creative and critical possibilities of culturally specific perspectives in search of cross-cultural and universal conceptions,

a criticism which seems to be more or less correct with regard to the section “Philosophical Currents in Japan” in *Begriff und Bild*, the titles of which exclusively employ Western notions (Empiricism, German Idealism, Phenomenology, Existentialism, Analytic Philosophy) to characterize the tendencies of modern Japanese philosophy.

While Davis’ approach in the *Handbook* seems to lean towards the other extreme, namely, by excluding disciplines shaped by Western discourse from the overall structure of the volume (phenomenology is the only “Western” discipline explicitly covered in a standalone chapter, again with a focus on specifically Japanese contributions), the focus on modes of thought intrinsically shaped by certain Japanese specificities appears to be more productive than a Eurocentric approach. As Davis convincingly argues, a philosophical argument or mode of thought *can* draw



on a set of culturally specific ideas while at the same time aiming at cross-cultural or universal insights. As long as we remain critical of essentialist, nationalist, and orientalist tendencies, culturally specific modes of thought can (and should) be integrated as valid and fruitful sources into non-Ameri-Eurocentric modes of philosophizing. This seems to be ever more relevant in regard to our contemporary situation in which various cultures and sub-cultures intertwine in the concrete lives of the embodied and often multilingual subjects that philosophize. As Davis states in a terminology reminiscent of Nishida's "logic of place":

Cultures, language[s], and traditions both shape (determine) and are shaped (counter-determined) by the expressive acts of individuals. Individuals also shape and are shaped by subcultures within a culture, and those subcultures have various relations – some complementary and some antagonistic – with one another.

One could add that rather than merely moving from monocultural to bicultural settings, we are living in a globalized landscape that has led to multi-, cross-, and inter-cultural environments with an ever-increasing and pluralized set of interacting sub-cultures, sub-languages, and sub-traditions. Japanese philosophy can be one of the many centers of a philosophizing taking place in the midst of this situation of pluralized cross- and counter-determination, with more and more scholars *outside* of Japan using the (already cross-culturally formed) traditions of Japanese thought as sources for their own philosophies.

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The fourth part featuring modern Japanese philosophy occupies almost half the space of the *Handbook*, showing the great importance given to the modern era in the conception of the anthology. This focus and the distinction between the modern and the pre-modern (or extra-modern) as such could be criticized as an already Eurocentric framework, ignoring alternatives such as using certain types of native Japanese periodization (Heian period, Kamakura period, etc.). The use of a native periodization could help to avoid the possibly value-laden distinction between the modern and the pre-modern altogether. On the other hand, the appropriation of "modernity" (*kindai* 近代)

by Japanese thinkers themselves, and the use of "early modernity" (*kinsei* 近世) for a time even before contact with the Western world could serve to justify this decision and point towards a possible diversification of the concept of modernity itself in the direction of "multiple modernities."

## **WE ARE LIVING IN A GLOBALIZED LANDSCAPE THAT HAS LED TO MULTI-, CROSS-, AND INTER-CULTURAL ENVIRONMENTS WITH AN EVER-INCREASING AND PLURALIZED SET OF INTERACTING SUB-CULTURES, SUB-LANGUAGES, AND SUB-TRADITIONS**

The chapters of this section cover some of the most well-known representatives of the Kyoto school (Nishida Kitarō, Tanabe Hajime, Miki Kiyoshi, Nishitani Keiji, and Ueda Shizuteru), as well as other relatively well-known figures such as Watsuji Tetsurō and Kuki Shuzō. All chapters are written by experts from the field and represent, as expected, some of the finest scholarship on the respective thinkers. In the best cases, the articles not only give a multilayered overview of their philosophies, but also contextualize them in relation to both Asian and Western thought, and bring them into dialogue with current debates and topics, showing paths of possible elaboration and for the philosophical advancement of their theories. Despite this, some of the essays suffer from over-simplifications of Western philosophy, which is sometimes depicted as almost nothing but crude dualism, such as in Shigenori Nagatomo's account (Ch. 27) of Yuasa Yasuo's philosophy of self-cultivation (*shugyō* 修行, embodied spiritual "praxis").

John C. Maraldo's "The Japanese Encounter with and Appropriation of Western Philosophy" (Ch. 15) gives

a concise but rich overview of the introduction of Western philosophical terminology to Japan in the period around the Meiji Restoration (1868), featuring thinkers who paved the way for later philosophers. The following piece by Ōhashi Ryōsuke and Akitomi Katsuya (Ch. 16), opening the section on the Kyoto School, presents the history of the school over three generations. The authors also try to show how the so-called “Ōshima Memoranda” suggest that the Kyoto school members were not collaborating with the ultra-nationalist military regime but actually trying to counter its aggressive and expansionist agenda under the risk of their lives.

A second article by Maraldo (Ch. 18) connects Nishida’s dialectics with Robert Sokolowski’s work on distinctions and interprets his notion of absolute nothingness in relation to Zhuangzi’s play with obscurity and vagueness. Melissa Anne-Marie Curley’s article (Ch. 20) shows not only possible critiques of Miki Kiyoshi’s philosophy but also ways of overcoming them by elaborating his notions of embodiment and pathos in relation to Henri Lefebvre’s analyses of everyday life. And Erin McCarthy (Ch. 23) shows some possible applications of Watsuji’s notion of *fūdo* (風土) to environmental ethics.

While each article of the section (and the volume as a whole) would each deserve a separate analysis, in the following we will focus on articles that deal with some of the less well-known philosophers and strands of thought covered in this section, since the *Handbook* makes the respective scholarship on some of them accessible to a greater audience for the first time.

Terao Kazuyoshi’s overview of “Japanese Christian Philosophies” (Ch. 26) gives a very dense overview that is structured according to seven major tendencies of Christian thought in modern and contemporary Japan: the No-Church movement (*mukyōkai* 無教会), Christian philology, Marxist and Socialist Christian philosophy, Christian philosophies of religion, Christian philosophy in a Buddhist key, generative Christian philosophy, and popular Christian philosophy. While the text suffers from a lack of detail due to the great number of thinkers covered in only ten pages, it provides some orientation and possible starting points for readers interested in diving deeper into specifically Japanese developments of Christian thought.

Rikki Kersten’s “Postwar Japanese Political Philosophy: Marxism, Liberalism, and the Quest for Autonomy” (Ch. 28) presents key thinkers and debates in Japanese political philosophy between 1945 and 1970. While Kersten’s selection appears somewhat selective and incomplete in some parts, with an overly prominent focus on Yoshimoto Takaaki and his respondents in the concluding sections, its depiction of post-war debates is nevertheless a valuable contribution to the field of Japanese political philosophy. The article features debates on *shutaisei* 主体性 (“autonomy,” or alternatively: “subjectivity”) and *tenkō* 転向 (“conversion” or “apostasy”). While the former notion was employed by political thinkers as a possible antidote to pre-war deficiencies like the (semi-)feudal attitude of wartime Japanese, the latter, going back to the mass defections of communists from the Japan Communist Party in the 1930s and 1940s, touches upon questions of individual responsibility and the lack of coordinated wartime resistance. It would have been helpful to contextualize the Japanese debates within a framework of post-war discourse on a global level, or at least compare them to similar debates in the West. This would enable the reader to understand the intricacies of Japanese Marxist and liberalist discourses in comparison to other local developments.

Michiko Yusa’s and Leah Kalmanson’s article (Ch. 29), the only chapter devoted to a female thinker, is comprised of two parts. The first part shows how Hiratsuka Raichō’s feminist philosophy was influenced by her experience with Zen practice, prompting her to develop an account of the sexed body, which is presented according to different phases in Raichō’s thought and in dialogue with the work of Swedish feminist Ellen Key. The second part elaborates the significance of Raichō’s ideas in the larger context of feminist philosophy, both in Japan and the West, showing how Raichō’s philosophy could be brought into a productive dialogue with feminist care ethics and the intersection between Womanism and Buddhism.

Tani Tōru (Ch. 30) and Kobayashi Yasuo (Ch. 31) each focus on a group of four philosophers to narrate specific developments in contemporary Japanese philosophy. Tani presents Japanese phenomenology through the works of Sakabe Megumi, Nitta Yoshihiro, Noé Keiichi, and Washida Kiyokazu, while Kobayashi coins the term “Komaba quartet” (almost a “Tokyo School”) for

the philosophers Hiromatsu Wataru, Sakabe Megumi, Ōmori Shōzō and Inoue Tadashi, each of whom taught at the Komaba campus of Tokyo University. As with other articles that have the character of an overview, their accounts are more or less schematic but succeed in showing a limited number of thinkers and theories paradigmatic for their respective fields.

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In conclusion, the *Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy* can be considered as an essential tool both for students new to the field and already established scholars of Japanese philosophy. While omitting a range of less well-known thinkers (as can be seen, for example, in comparison to the *Sourcebook*), the *Handbook* succeeds in giving a broad overview of Japanese philosophy in all its diversity and opens up critical and innovative perspectives.

## THE HANDBOOK SHOWS JAPANESE PHILOSOPHY AS AN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION DEVELOPING BETWEEN ITS OWN NATIVE HERITAGE AND PROCESSES OF SINIFICATION AND WESTERNIZATION, BETWEEN SELF-COLONIZATION AND SELF-VALORIZATION, BETWEEN INSULARITY AND OPENNESS

The *Handbook* shows how the very concepts of “Japanese philosophy” and “*Nihon tetsugaku*” are – through the work of both Japanese and non-Japanese scholars – enmeshed in a continuous process of translation and interlingual re-interpretation between East and West, within a highly dynamic, intercultural

contextuality operating on a global scale. The *Handbook* shows Japanese philosophy as a striking example of an intellectual tradition developing between its own native heritage and processes of Sinification and Westernization, between self-colonization and self-valorization, between insularity and openness. Borrowing Yoko Arisaka’s words in the concluding chapter, the *Handbook* offers hints to “a constructive way to move forward with Japanese philosophy today, [...] beyond multiculturalism to a *decolonized* world order” (771) that allows for a critical and flexible reflection on the fundamental question of what philosophy *is* and *how* it can operate in an increasingly globalized landscape. It opens up several possible paths for this kind of reflection by promoting a non-essentialist, cross-disciplinary, critical, innovative and multi-layered approach to Japanese philosophy that for the most part avoids one-sided simplifications and orientalist essentializations.

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