

Book Review: A Guide to Asian Philosophy Classics

Puqun Li (with Arthur K. Ling), *A Guide to Asian Philosophy Classics* (Broadview Publishers, Peterborough, Ontario and Buffalo, New York, 2012)
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Puqun Li has provided a helpful entryway for newcomers into Asian philosophy. He has done so not by resorting to what are always doomed to be indefensible generalities about this vast and philosophically complex group of cultures, but rather by prudently and helpfully providing cogent readings of ten Indian, Chinese, and Japanese classics.

The book begins with a consideration of the Indian heritage. Hinduism is introduced by an analysis of the Upanishads. Unfortunately, Hinduism only gets a single chapter and the *Bhagavad-Gita*, for example, does not receive substantial commentary. Indian Buddhism fares better with a consideration of both its early expression and its refashioning as the Mahayana (or Great Vehicle). Early Theravada Buddhism is discussed by taking up the Dhammapada, and Mahayana is introduced through Nagarjuna's Madyamaka or Middle Way as Li takes on the famously vexing *Mulamadyamakakarika* (*The Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*). Li examines select arguments from Garfield's edition of this text, including a helpful discussion of Nagarjuna's critique of substantial accounts of time.

Li then turns to China, which forms the majority of the book. Confucian philosophy is presented through an explication of the *Analects*, the *Mengzi*, and finally the *Xunzi*, which defends Confucian philosophy while adapting elements of rival schools. Li also discusses early philosophical Daoism by analyzing this tradition's two most famous and celebrated works, the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*. Li finishes his consideration of China by turning to Chan Buddhism. Using the Dun-huang version of the manuscript made famous in the sixties by Philip Yampolsky, Li takes up the *Platform Sutra*, historically attributed to Hui Neng, but really the work of multiple authors. China receives three-fifths of the attention here, and Li's discussions of Chinese texts are the book's best chapters, his readings enhanced by clear and accessible analyses of some of the original Chinese terms and phrases.

Li concludes by turning to Dogen Zenji's Kamakura period Soto Zen masterpiece, the *Shobogenzo* (*Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*). The entirety of this complex and interlocking collection of fascicles is longer than all of the other works that Li considers in this book combined, so he wisely only concentrates on a few emblematic fascicles that he takes from Waddell and Abe's *The Heart of Dogen's Shobogenzo*. Li considers *Genjokoan* ("Manifesting Suchness") as well as the famous discussion of the nonseparation of being and time (*Uji*), *Shoji*, Dogen's consideration of the great matter of living and dying, and *Bussho*, Dogen's meditation on the problem of Buddha nature.

Li's analyses, written as accessibly as such difficult material allows, may be of interest to general readers who are trying to find their way into these traditions, but his target audience seems to be undergraduate philosophy students working at a largely introductory level. Li keeps discussions of the scholarly debates around these texts to a minimum (although he is always sure to mention the most salient issues).

Moreover, Li has inserted many features that one normally expects to find in the more

traditional textbook format. Each chapter is linked to a suggested primary source, namely the translation and passages of the work that Li will be discussing. Li then provides “learning objectives.” For example, if you make it through Li’s chapter on the *Platform Sutra*, you will be able to 1) “describe the general features of Chinese Chan Buddhism” as well as, among other objectives, be able to “compare and evaluate Shen Xiu’s ‘gradual awakening’ and Hui Neng’s ‘sudden awakening’” (259). I am not sure what Hui Neng would have thought about the transformation of the great question of awakening into a learning outcome. I personally lament the incursion of such bureaucratic compromises into the practice of philosophy, but I also recognize that this battle may already be lost. For teachers hard pressed to produce such rhetoric, Li’s objectives will be highly welcome.

Li then provides a vocabulary list (“key words”) of the important critical terms for each work, as well as questions that his own analysis will try to answer. For example, one of the questions that guides Li’s analysis of the *Platform Sutra* is: “How did Indian Buddhism fuse with the indigenous Chinese Confucianism and Daoism?” (260) Li also interpolates boxed areas that either include terse and often helpful microreflections or provide sample writing assignments and prompts.

Li wisely avoids speaking in wild and indefensible generalities about Asian philosophy. When he makes comparisons, they are between specific ideas and texts, and Li does so not to catalogue coincidences and differences, but rather to “prompt dialogue, engagement, and fresh learning” (xv). His textual analyses recreate the original philosophical context of the work, demonstrate their inner coherence, and judiciously bring select ideas into dialogue with select Western philosophical ideas (xiii).

Li also incorporates some very helpful appendices, including some handy tips on pinyin pronunciation, a glossary of key terms, some useful websites and journals, and even some suggestions of programs for graduate study in Chinese philosophy.

While Li’s analysis helps students appreciate some of the vast philosophical range of Asian philosophy, he also draws three attractive conclusions about how these works can help us live a “human life.” Although the accounts of the self vary, none of these texts argue that an “ego-centered” life will help us flourish (312). Rather, to live well, one must become present to every moment and, finally, although teachers may help, every serious negotiator of the Way must learn to stand on her or his own two feet (313).

Li leans heavily toward China, but he also gives each of the ten included texts an appreciative and lucid reading. As such, this is a helpful guide for introductory students to enter the extraordinary world of these philosophical treasures.

Jason M. Wirth, Professor of Philosophy, Seattle University.