BOOK REVIEWS


Reviewed by Elisa Freschi University “Sapienza”

Reading Plant Lives: Borderline Beings in Indian Traditions by Ellison Banks Findly may at first seem an irritating experience for a Sanskrit scholar, since it appears to look in a seemingly uncritical way at many instances, taken from all sorts of texts (medical, kāvya, religious, mythologic, folkloric, etc.) in which the view is held that plants are living beings and, hence, are deserving of respect. After reflection, however, this may be seen as a positive aspect of the book, since it introduces Sanskritists to environmental ethics and makes environmental activists (and not only those in India) aware of Sanskrit sources that they might use while advocating on behalf of that portion of the environment occupied by plants. Hence, if one shares the fundamental goal of environmental conservation, this book is not just an interesting study; it represents a positive step toward achieving this goal.

Let me begin by outlining the purpose of the book. Most of the criticism that it may raise is indeed linked to what we would like it to be about. The author, instead, states clearly:

In this study, I hope to show that many of the things that are on our minds today about plants were also on the minds of traditional thinkers in early and medieval India, in ways that had clarity and precision then and that can be appreciated as such now. Moreover, the doctrines about plants developed in traditional religious and philosophical circles in India continue to provide formative and grounding material for activist work there undertaken by individuals and groups today. (pp. xxix–xxx; emphasis added)

I hope not to force too much of my own interpretation on the author’s intent if I try to bridge the first and the second statements and sum up the book as showing only those “doctrines about plants developed in traditional religious and philosophical circles in India” that can “provide formative and grounding material for activist work there undertaken by individuals and groups today.” This means that the author is interested not in a general discussion about plants in Indian culture, but instead in a very selective study of how plants are perceived by different groups within the larger Indian tradition:

Being a “borderline case” suggests . . . that in each of the traditions . . . there are a variety of views about plants and that, while we have focused on those texts and passages that we might call “plant-positive,” many texts, thinkers, and movements pay no attention to plants at all—or may hold dismissive views. Borderline, then, here suggests that the case on behalf of plants is highly selective and may not represent a whole tradition’s view. . . . (p. 410; emphasis added).

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Accordingly, Findly basically dedicates the whole first part (pp. 1–266) and half of the second (pp. 267–336) to this process of selection from so-called “Hindu,” Buddhist, and Jaina views, of all which can be regarded as “positive” toward plants and can be applied in contemporary environmentalist movements.

The third part (pp. 407–574) is dedicated to (1) the actualization of these themes in the work of selected Indian spiritual teachers of the present time, and (2) the way Indian and Indian-inspired activists have used these ideas in their environmentalist work. However, “environmentalism” itself is not a neutral “frame.” (In a different context, Findly quotes John Cort saying that environmentalism is, together with scientific methods, Copernican astronomy, nationalism, industrial capitalism, globalization, feminism, social justice, human rights, etc., “one of the several new epistemes to which the world’s religious traditions have had to respond in recent centuries” [John Cort, Green Jainism? p. 66; quoted on p. 479].)

Findly’s adoption of the environmentalist point of view is overt. The second chapter of part 2 (pp. 337–406) is called “Plant Rights and Human Duties” and starts with the following words: “We now move from traditional understandings of what is to what should be” (p. 337; emphasis original). “What should be” is exemplified by the views of environmental ethicists such as Paul Taylor, Christopher Stone, Peter Singer, and James A. Nash. But Findly does not simply record their views; she connects them with the Indian background, again showing how Indian classical themes may be used in today’s call for an environmental ethic. Moreover, she proposes further environmentalist developments of Indian themes. For instance, she suggests that the traditional understanding of plants as related to tamas-guna, one of the three traditional “threads” out of which the whole cosmos is made—corresponding, respectively, to dullness (tamas), activity (rajas), and clarity (sattva)—could be reversed in favor of plants. Their fixedness could in fact be read as a manifestation of sattva rather than tamas, and interpreted in a positive way as possessing the faculty of not being disturbed by outer events and maintaining one’s own inner calm. Plants can represent sattva insofar as they bestow their gifts on everyone, without regard for reciprocation.

The Challenge of Metaphors

This link to sattva is an interesting re-reading of a traditional motif and may be useful for an appreciation of Indian cultures even as one is focused on the problem of plant preservation. Findly seems to suggest from time to time that this view is already available in Indian texts: “We note also that for modern Jains, plants can be . . . that class of living [things] who are models for human perfection, for, as in Buddhism, forest trees can be looked upon as saints, or more specifically, trees can be interpreted as sattva beings” (p. 500; emphasis original). The evidence she offers is not, however, totally convincing. Buddhist texts that refer to trees as “saints” do indeed see trees as models for saintly human behavior, insofar as they are models for deep meditation. But these texts do not see trees themselves as saintly beings.
More generally, the author seems to overstate metaphorical usage as evidence of conscious sensitivity in plants. Many pages are devoted to the human qualities of plants—for example, the reference to the arms of a young girl “chained around my neck” (Caurapaṇiṣṭikā, quoted on p. 291), and (in the Rāmāyana) to the trees moved by the wind, which rustle and seem “almost . . . to weep” (p. 298). Such literary flourishes ultimately prove, Findly argues, that “trees can be reanimated back to life as humans can be . . . ; trees can make decisions, trees can dance and can express love, eroticism, and delight; and, finally, trees can hear teaching and respond, as the Lotus Sūtra’s Parable of the Herbs so aptly shows” (p. 300). But trees do not express love et cetera; it is rather up to the poets to read human qualities into vegetal ones.1 Similarly, one species of willow (introduced to North America from China) is called “Weeping Willow” not because it is believed to be grieving for something, but because its branches, bent downwards, remind us of our human response to grief.

In a similar vein, a Thai monk speaks about his idea of performing “tree ordinations” in order to safeguard trees, as follows:

If a tree is wrapped in saffron robes, no one would dare cut it down. So I thought that perhaps this idea could be used to discourage logging and I began performing ceremonies on trees in the forest near the temple. I called the ritual an “ordination” to give it more weight. The term “tree ordination” sounds weird to Thai people since an ordination is a ritual applied only to men. This weirdness has helped spread the news by word of mouth. (Phrakhru Manas, quoted on p. 521).

Thus, Thai Buddhist monks are aware of the usefulness of Buddhist symbols “to build villagers’ commitment to . . . ecology projects” (p. 521, quoting Susan M. Darlington, The Ordination of a Tree: The Buddhist Ecology Movement in Thailand).

To achieve success, a book like this one must evoke a universal sympathetic attitude toward nature, but the overuse of the kinds of metaphors offered here may end up turning away those readers who might otherwise respond more favorably to a more realistic approach. Lambert Schmithausen’s works on Buddhism and nature, and specifically Buddhism and plants, may be more convincing precisely because they carefully examine also the arguments against the image of sentient plants with human qualities that is offered by Buddhism.

The Sentience of Plants

The evidence in favor of conscious sensitivity in plants constitutes the philosophical core of the book. The author has assembled an impressive collection of quotations and textual evidence from a variety of sources that include the Vedas, the Buddhist Pāli Canon, the Jain Canon, literary epics, Sanskrit and Tamil kāvya, the Dharmāsāstras, Vṛksāyurveda (phytotherapy), Āyurveda, and folktales. Collectively, these present a strong argument for the sentience of plants, notwithstanding the cautions mentioned above concerning the overuse of metaphor. Thus, much of the traditional Indian teachings can be of some use in today’s campaigns for the preservation of plants.

But, what are plants? Could they have been conceived by the Indian traditions in
exactly the same way as in the (basically Western) contemporary world? The author does not directly address this problem, but some indirect information can be extracted from some of the texts she quotes—and from passages that, perhaps intentionally, she does not. The category “plant,” thus, may end up appearing less uncontroversial than one might initially assume. On the one hand, “plants” do not constitute a coherent whole in the Indian view; on the other hand, what we consider to be “plants” are not always sharply distinguished from what we would rather call “animals” or “matter.” Similar problems arise within the common Western understanding of plants as well, in cases where the layperson may be confused by something unfamiliar. For example, to the nonspecialist, corals may regarded as plants because of their “plant-like” appearance—and likewise phytoplankton (minute oceanic plant life), whose tiny size makes them indistinguishable from animal plankton.

Similarly, we can detect some ambiguity over what we would call “plants” in the Indian traditions. First, in many texts, especially the Vedic and early Jain, “plants” are seen as sentient beings insofar as they are part of a cosmos that is perceived to be constantly in motion. In this case, plants are part of the same organic continuum that embraces all the elements of the universe. Second, in other texts, plants (especially trees) are associated with deities. The exact link between a plant and the deity inhabiting it is not easy to ascertain, especially because one has to understand it from within the context of a narrative or religious text. A deity often seems to be conceived as inseparable from a tree, for example, although in other cases it is said to be able to leave one tree and move into another. In any case, it cannot live outside a plant, except for short periods. In some cases, trees as deities are anthropomorphized as having limbs, producing children, and so on. Gleaning what one can from the ancient texts that have survived, one wonders whether a plant said to be inhabited by a deity was originally thought of as an actual deity itself, or as the body of a deity and not just the place where it resided.

Third, not all plants are equal. Almost all of the texts quoted by Findly (including relatively recent ones) take for granted the higher status of trees (often called vanaspati), and both Vṛkṣāyurveda and contemporary activities aimed at benefiting plants focus on the preservation of trees. From a different standpoint, the parts of plants associated with generation (e.g., seeds, sprouts, blossoms) are deemed to deserve greater respect in Jain and Early Buddhist texts.

Fourth, it is probably no accident that a discussion of philosophical texts is altogether missing in this book. In fact, in many such texts, one witnesses a sort of “rationalistic” attitude against the evidence in favor of the sentience of plants, for example in Dharmaśāstra and narrative texts; one sometimes gets the impression that this is a reaction against popular beliefs. They seem to be offering a neutral, rational view as opposed to a folkloric one. A Prabhākara Mīmāṃsā primer (Rāmānuja’s Tantra-rahasya), for instance, counts plants as living beings, but excludes them—overly dissenting from some Manusmṛti quotations—from the possibility of achieving fruition/realization/enjoyment (bhoga) and, hence, from the realm of karman-bound creatures. Later Buddhist texts even state that plants are not living things and classify them on the same level as earth and rock.²

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Lastly, it is difficult to define the exact nature of common beliefs about plants. The texts indicate two somewhat conflicting attitudes, one that considers plants to be the lowest class of living beings (so that eating them is ethically sanctioned), and the other that regards some trees and other special plants as sacred and worthy of honor and respect. Evidence of the latter can be found in Tribal and non-mainstream Indian traditions (see pp. 302–318).

**About Plant-speciesism**

Opinions about the status of plants differ even among contemporary ethicists. Peter Singer, for instance, maintains that plants do not suffer (see p. 364). This claim has major implications, since Singer is a proponent of anti-speciesism: “Speciesism . . . is a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species” (Singer, *Animal Liberation*, p. 6; quoted on p. 363). The boundaries between species can be overcome, Singer follows, if one stops asking whether other living beings can reason, but rather asks whether they can suffer. Hence, since plants are said not to suffer, one might argue that Singer is just substituting an older speciesism with a newer one and that his work does not constitute a “complete change in our attitudes to nonhumans” (ibid., p. 135; quoted on p. 362), but only to animals.

Findly participates in this debate, taking the side of plants, and she uses Indian traditional motifs in order to argue for the inclusion of plants among sentient beings, at least at a lower stage of consciousness, and thus capable of suffering. She even hints at the idea of the spiritual superiority of plants. However, it is difficult to make the case that plants can accumulate new *karman*, as it is difficult to conceive of plants as choosing to act in one way or another. But this does not necessarily entail the conclusion sketched in the Mīmāṃsā text mentioned above. In fact, Findly argues, plants could even be considered spiritually emancipated souls, consuming their last *karman* in their present vegetal existence (p. 249).

As suggested above, this book is not about the history of a philosophical concept, but rather an essay in applied philosophy. Still, one is left with many doubts about the feasibility of a program of nonviolence applied to plants as a whole, that is, to all sorts of plants without any sort of hierarchical distinction, as the author implies (p. xi). One might argue, for instance, that in order to plant a tree one needs to clear the weeds from the spot where it is to be planted. However, preferring trees to weeds might itself be an example of speciesism, where trees are regarded as much more useful than weeds for our own survival and well-being.

**Notes**

1 – I am grateful to my colleague Sara Rella for her reflections on this point.

2 – This conclusion may strike a contemporary reader as unusual, since growth is, for us, positive evidence of life, but the parallel of crystals may help us to conceive of growing
substances that are in fact inert. In Western philosophy, one is reminded of René Descartes’ position about animals, which may appear as though they are expressing emotion, but are actually just “machines.” In fact, we do not know that animals (and, even less, plants) express emotion. We can only infer this based on similarities with human behavior, but the counter-example of a robot displaying a similar behavior (tears, cries, etc.) without actually feeling anything at all, always applies.


Reviewed by Aaron B. Creller  University of Hawai’i

Steve Coutinho’s Zhuangzi and Early Chinese Philosophy: Vagueness, Transformation and Paradox, is a comparative philosophy project masterfully carried out on two levels, the methodological and the interpretive. Coutinho provides a translation of the Zhuangzi that is both contextually rooted and philosophically rich. Whether or not one agrees with Coutinho’s interpretation, there is much to be gleaned from his book. The first few chapters create a meta-philosophical structure that the rest of the book puts to use. Given the lucid movement from development to application, there is something here for both the newcomer to comparative philosophy and those well versed in Warring States Chinese philosophy. To readers in comparative philosophy, Coutinho’s writing is an excellent example of exploring a topic while putting resources from different time periods and cultures to work on their own terms. Sorites paradoxes, debates about the meaning of ming 明, and Vienna Circle writings on indeterminacy all make appearances as the author develops a description of vagueness that resonates with the Zhuangzi and opens up a new interpretation of it.

The first, introductory chapter justifies both the author’s methodological approach to the Zhuangzi and the other texts being referenced, as well as broadly laying out the role of terms crucial to his reading, such as “vagueness” and “clarity,” in Western and Chinese Warring States philosophy. The next two chapters explore issues of textual context and translator/interpreter context. Chapter 2 describes Zhuang Zhou as a historicized author, contextualizing him through Sima Qian’s biography and the literary tradition that arises from it, as well as the political and philosophical environment of the states of Song and Chu. Following this placement of the author in Chu, Coutinho then employs current studies from mainland China to provide a description of Chu culture and philosophy. Here he also provides a working vocabulary of Daoist language and imagery important in later chapters, such as the description of reflection on nature, tian 天, and its processes as the “means by which the sage gained philosophical insight—a thorough and penetrating understanding, tong 通, of all change” (pp. 29–30). In chapter 3, Coutinho describes his own context, including the various frameworks that shape his approach to the intertwined process of translation and interpretation. Rather than force any single framework, he acknowledges the need to put different methodologies to use in the situations in which they work best.
This chapter concludes with his own descriptions of the role that different approaches play in his interpretation, including phenomenological, analytic, semiotic, hermeneutic, structuralist, and poststructuralist.

From this point on, Coutinho moves chapter by chapter in a grand circle, starting with avoiding common interpretive mistakes about Zhuangzi and focusing on themes in the text itself, then moving through other Warring States works that ground these themes in the intellectual history of China, and finishing with his own take on the Zhuangzi, which focuses on its second chapter, the “Qiwulun.” In chapter 4, Coutinho uses textual analysis to respond to the skeptical and relativist interpretations of the text; he focuses not on placing Zhuang Zhou’s work in an exhaustively defined Western philosophical camp, but instead on the themes of the text itself—the permeability and shadowiness of the boundaries between things, and the value of working through vagueness rather than eliminating it. Next, with a basic interpretation of the text’s theme in hand, chapter 5 introduces the Mohist project of clarity to which the Zhuangzi is responding. Throughout this chapter, Coutinho weaves primary textual analysis and comparisons with Western philosophy together into one cohesive strand, explicating the later Mohist canon through terminology comfortable to Western philosophy. However, he is careful in distinguishing the Aristotelian concepts of contraries and contradictories from what he calls the “contrasts” used in Chinese philosophy. By the end of the chapter, he has skillfully constructed an interpretation of the Mohist project without reducing it to Western philosophical terms.

In chapter 6, Coutinho returns to the concept of vagueness, first through an analytic examination of its role in Western philosophy and linguistics, followed by an attempt to locate his concept of vagueness within the philosophical language of the Laozi. Through the use of sorites paradoxes and uncontroversial examples of the process of change, such as a sapling becoming a tree, Coutinho reveals the indeterminacy of concepts used to categorize the world. From recognizing the prevalence of indeterminacy, the description of vagueness is thickened enough to be put to use in chapter seven by contrasting it with the Western philosophical discourses surrounding essence and meaning. Whereas chapter 6 focuses on vagueness, in chapter 7 Coutinho considers similar ideas about the indeterminacy of meaning found in the writings of Friedrich Waismann and Ludwig Wittgenstein. He then uses the indeterminacy of distinctions and blurred borderline cases, framed as sorites paradoxes, as the framework for reading the “Qiwulun.”

The last chapter makes use of the philosophical context Coutinho has painted. Chapter 4 breaks down the assumptions made about Zhuangzi’s skeptical or relativist claims and chapter 5 establishes the intellectual project to which the Zhuangzi is a response. Chapters 6 and 7 develop vagueness for the sake of the final chapter, where the Zhuangzi can be interpreted both as a reply to the Mohist position and a text that anticipates the current problems of indeterminacy in Western philosophical thought. For Coutinho, the problems of the penumbra and borderline cases extend beyond the Warring States period to the Western setting, where clarity is artificially maintained by rigid borders at the expense of unexplained anomalies. In his rather brief conclusion, he uses this grand circle of Western and Chinese philosophy to problematize
certain surviving assumptions from Aristotle’s day—the principle of noncontradiction, the law of excluded middle, and essentialist metaphysics—and hint at the direction for positive takes on vagueness, found in such “pragmatically oriented logics as those developed by [Nicholas] Rescher and [Graham] Priest” (p. 178).

Despite the skillful movement between philosophical analysis and careful interpretation, Coutinho employs an assumption about the Zhuangzi that does not prove useful. In the second chapter, where the history of the author and the text are discussed in order to justify his later interpretations, he notes that “the individuality of Zhuangzi’s own voice is unmistakable” (p. 21). He then uses one of Sima Qian’s always interesting but usually embellished biographies to place the owner of that voice in a specific town, Meng, in the borderlands between the states of Song and Chu. Zhuangzi is thus located within the cultural setting of Chu, the geographic setting for the birth of Daoism.

Although Coutinho considers some protests against the validity of this particular set of claims regarding Chu and its culture, the problem I see is one not of historical fact but of interpretive use. Zhuangzi’s identity in the literary tradition rests on Sima Qian’s biography in the Shiji and the stories within the Zhuangzi itself, but contemporary textual and linguistic analysis are leaning more toward a chorus of “Zhuangzi-men 莊子們.” Coutinho does take into account the accretion of the text and the variety of authors across the outer and miscellaneous chapters, and it is true that the debate over the number of Zhuangzi voices in the inner chapters is relatively recent. However, the larger problem is that much of the context of Chu philosophy and Zhuangzi biography does not play a role in Coutinho’s final translation and interpretation. Coutinho’s claims about vagueness and boundary issues could just as easily be made using a more cautious approach to issues of authorship and Chu culture. The linguistic and intellectual connections he draws between texts, such as the Mohist canon and the Zhuangzi, put these works into a (historically speaking) safer context while still providing the same mileage as his current argument with its unused biographical assertions.

As a new translation and interpretation, Coutinho’s Zhuangzi and Early Chinese Philosophy is insightful and stimulating. It takes the reader through some common intellectual assumptions about the Zhuangzi and makes it more approachable. As a comparative project, it is an excellent model of metaphilosophy and application. Overall, I recommend it for those looking at Warring States or comparative philosophy.

Notes

1 – Zhuangzi-men 莊子們 is my own neologism to describe the chorus of voices that are the authors of the Zhuangzi, a diversity that can be found even in the inner chapters. The divisions offered by A. C. Graham (Chuang-tzū: The Seven Inner Chapters and Other Writings from the Book Chuang-tzū [London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981]) and Liu Xiaogan (Classifying the Zhuangzi Chapters [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994]) of the text to which Coutinho makes reference are useful, but the analysis of Chu rhyme and the inner chapters in David McCraw’s Stratifying Zhuangzi: Rhyme and other Quantitative
Evidence (Taibei: Academica Sinica, forthcoming) undermines the placement of a single Zhuang Zhou in Chu and points toward a chorus of authors within the Zhuangzi’s first seven chapters.


Reviewed by JeeLoo Liu California State University at Fullerton

A new set of translations of works by Neo-Confucians is a desperately needed project for the study of Chinese philosophy, and Philip J. Ivanhoe, in his new book Readings from the Lu-Wang School of Neo-Confucianism, has taken an admirable lead in his selective translations of two prominent Neo-Confucians, Lu Xiangshan and Wang Yangming, known together as the Lu-Wang School. Readings from the Lu-Wang School reflects a deep philosophical understanding of the two philosophers’ views, and a comprehensive knowledge of the tradition of Chinese philosophy. The translated text is accompanied by helpful introductions to each philosopher and detailed scholarly notations. These notations, along with the elegant translation and representative selections of the text, make this book the authoritative edition of the Lu-Wang works in English.

The writings of Neo-Confucians have not been adequately translated into English, and this is a main reason why Neo-Confucian philosophy is not widely known in the English-speaking world. Many philosophers working on Chinese philosophy lack a mastery of Chinese and must rely on existing translations. The only comprehensive translations from all of the major Neo-Confucian works are compiled in Wing-tsit Chan’s A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy (Princeton University Press, 1963). However, it is not easy to engage in respectable philosophical study of Neo-Confucianism on the basis of this source book alone. Ivanhoe’s translation of Lu Xiangshan’s and Wang Yangming’s works is thus a welcome endeavor.

When the reader must rely on existing translations to approach Chinese philosophy, she would naturally wonder whether the selection is representative of the philosophers’ views and whether the translation accurately captures the philosophical spirit of these philosophers. Ivanhoe’s Readings can dispel such worries. With both Lu Xiangshan and Wang Yangming, Ivanhoe’s selections are more comprehensive than Chan’s Source Book. Ivanhoe’s choice of Lu Xiangshan’s work is similar to Chan’s selections, including Lu’s philosophical correspondence with friends, his short essays, and his recorded sayings. Ivanhoe does not provide as many quotes from Lu’s recorded sayings as Chan does, and this is a minor drawback of the book. However, Chan’s selection from Lu’s letters or other writings amounts to scanty paragraphs or remarks out of context, while Ivanhoe places his selections in their original context by covering a major part of each piece. Chan’s selections from Wang Yangming’s work include only Wang’s Inquiry on the Great Learning (Daxuewen 大學問) and Instructions for Practical Living (Chuanxilu 傳習錄), whereas Ivanhoe’s Readings
includes both these documents (which he translates as *Questions on the Great Learning* and *A Record for Practice*), as well as additional selections from Wang’s philosophical correspondence and his poetry. Overall, Ivanhoe’s *Readings* gives a more complete presentation of the two philosophers’ philosophical writings than the *Source Book* does. One also gets to see more of the philosophers’ personalities from the various writing styles selected.

In comparing Ivanhoe’s *Readings* to the original Chinese texts, I was often struck by the ingenious choice of words that Ivanhoe makes. The choices reflect Ivanhoe’s philosophical insights on the philosophy at issue. For example, one would naturally be tempted to translate Wang Yangming’s phrase *benti* 本體 as “substance” (as Chan has done in the *Source Book*) since this is the standard translation for the phrase in other contexts, but this rendition makes it seem that Wang has postulated some transcendent entity in his ontology. Ivanhoe translates it as “the original state,” “the fundamental state,” or “the embodied state,” depending on what the context demands, such as in “Knowing is the original state of the heart-mind” (p. 147) and in “The nature is the embodied state of the heart-mind” (p. 145). Such translations not only make Wang’s philosophy more accessible, but also prevent misinterpreting Wang’s philosophy as a form of “panpsychism” (p. 109). Ivanhoe’s translation is both reflective and insightful. He does not rigidly use the same word to translate the same Chinese character, since he understands that Chinese characters take on different meanings in different contexts. For example, the Chinese word *shi* 實 is translated as “the real thing itself,” “actual,” “substantial,” and “concrete,” et cetera (p. 49 n. 68).

In one passage, Lu discusses how various schools have different teachings (*shuo*) and actuality (*shi*), various practices corresponding to their teaching (p. 51). Ivanhoe’s translation explicates the remark by rendering *shi* as “the actual forms of life.” In another case, he renders *shi jian* as “substantive view” and its counterpart *xu jian* as “insubstantial view” (p. 64), and such translations enhance the reader’s comprehension. These are just some examples that show how the translation reflects a deep understanding of the philosophy and of the language.

One of the best features of this book is its detailed notations, which sometimes give helpful background for a particular passage, sometimes cite the literary source of a particular phrase, and sometimes biographically sketch people referenced in the text. Such notations are indispensable for readers not thoroughly familiar with Chinese classics, since frequently some words and phrases are used with reference to remarks in these classics and convey special meaning. For example, the casual phrase “like water pouring off a high roof” is explained as coming from the *Book of History*, with the connotation that if one grasps the basics, then all else comes easily (p. 77 n. 204). Another similar case is seen in the remark “One will be like the person who tried to build his house [according to advice he received from people passing by] on the road; the task will never be completed” (p. 81). Ivanhoe explains that this is a paraphrase of lines from the *Book of Songs* (p. 81 n. 219). Examples like these are abundant. Ivanhoe does not just translate the text; he lets readers know where Lu or Wang derived their literary repertoire in the explication of their views. These scholarly notations are consistent throughout the book, with careful cross-referencing to
previous notes. Ivanhoe takes great care to make sure that the book gives readers a full comprehension of not just the literary meaning but also the philosophical origin of the text.

There are two minor issues that I suggest for revision in a second edition, however. One is that the book is titled *Readings from the Lu-Wang School of Neo-Confucianism*, but the first part of the book (pp. 1–26) is an introduction and a translation of the *Platform Sutra* from Zen Buddhism. Ivanhoe has his reason: “We begin this volume of translations from the Lu-Wang School with selections from the Buddhist classic the *Platform Sutra* primarily because of the tremendous, poorly understood, and often overlooked influence Chinese Buddhism in general and this text in particular has had upon neo-Confucian thought” (p. 3). I appreciate his rationale and see that it is helpful to understand that Wang Yangming’s “mind as a mirror” metaphor (p. 119) makes a direct allusion back to the poems cited in the *Platform Sutra* (p. 16). However, having the *Platform Sutra* as part 1 of this book gives the mistaken impression that it is part of the lineage of the Lu-Wang School. Both Lu Xiangshan and Wang Yangming derived their philosophical ideas from various sources—Confucian classics, Daoist ideas, and certainly Zen Buddhism as well. Choosing only selections from the *Platform Sutra* in this book on the Lu-Wang School seems to place undue emphasis on the influence of Zen Buddhism alone. Furthermore, such an association between the Lu-Wang School and Zen Buddhism, although commonly made, is not uncontroversial. Both Lu and Wang severely criticized Buddhist ideology in their lifetimes and would probably reject such an association. I would thus recommend placing the *Platform Sutra* in an appendix, rather than as part 1 of the book.

A second minor issue is a disagreement on the translation of a particular term that Lu Xiangshan uses in his short essay “Seek and You Shall Get it.” Ivanhoe translates the term as “pure knowing” in the first line: “Pure knowing lies within human beings,” and explains that “Pure knowing (liangzhi 良知) is a term of art, taken from the *Mengzi*” (p. 91 n. 262). However, although liangzhi is indeed a term of art for Wang Yangming, what Lu Xiangshan uses here is “pure heart-mind” (liangxin 良心), not “pure knowing” (liangzhi 良知). This may seem a trivial distinction since Wang seems to use pure knowing (liangzhi 良知) to interpret the original state of the heart-mind (liangxin 良心); however, a case can be made that Lu and Wang differ in their views on the original state of the heart-mind. Lu explains Mengzi’s phrase “not losing one’s fundamental heart-mind” this way: “The ‘four sprouts’ are none other than this heart-mind. ‘What Heaven has endowed me with’ is none other than this heart-mind” (p. 73). He also says repeatedly, “Benevolence is the human heart-mind” (p. 92). His view of the human heart-mind focuses on one’s inborn moral sensibilities such as compassion, shame/resentment, reverence/humility, and knowing right from wrong (the *four sprouts*), while Wang’s view seems to focus more on the knowing (zhì 知) aspect. Whether Lu and Wang really differ in their views is itself a worthy topic for dispute, but Ivanhoe’s translation in this case does not allow such distinctions to be made, and could lead to an interjection of Wang’s ideas into Lu’s philosophy.
In conclusion, Ivanhoe’s *Readings* is a highly commendable translation of Lu Xiangshan’s and Wang Yangming’s works. It gives good coverage of their philosophical views and literary styles, and can be used as a reliable sourcebook for the Lu-Wang School. This book can be used for any course on Neo-Confucianism, and I will certainly adopt it myself when I teach such a course. I hope Ivanhoe will continue his endeavor and bring more Neo-Confucian works into the English-speaking world.


Reviewed by Geir Sigurðsson  University of Iceland

East-West philosophical encounters pose a tantalizing problem: virtually endless comparisons and attempts to find resonating (or contrasting) features seem to prevent us from ever getting to the heart of the matter and say what we want to say. It can be hard enough, as a matter of fact, to have to deal with only one of the traditions in question, as it requires that we work through a long list of commentaries and interpretations before we can even hope to find anything resembling a solution to the problem(s) giving rise to our explorations. In this way, the history of philosophy has become philosophy itself, as Günter Wohlfart writes in his challenging book, *Die Kunst des Lebens und andere Künste* (The art of living and other arts), echoing a complaint made by Albert Camus. The widespread philosophical tendency to bypass the complex historical and hermeneutical web of dialogues and return to simplicity, zu den Sachen selbst (Edmund Husserl), to that which “really matters,” is an understandable temptation. The tendency is recurrent in the history of Western philosophy, reaching a higher level of urgency at the turn of the twentieth century and beyond. In China, however, ancient Daoist philosophy already presents itself as such an endeavor to rid itself of the baggage of tradition, history, and established systems in its quest for optimal ways of living—and dying. The Daoist sage is one who finds stability and tranquility in the continuous turbulence of an ever-changing existence. But one does not become a sage out of the blue. Sagehood demands a long and continuous process of learning, self-cultivation, perspicacity, et cetera. It may very well consist in simplicity and plainness, but unfolding and cultivating these qualities is not necessarily simple and plain. It requires complex “undoings” of the acquired views and tendencies with which modern life has imbued us.

Sagehood is therefore a paradoxical combination of acquisition and forgetting—or this seems to be one among the many flavors contained in Günter Wohlfart’s philosophical soup of spicy Zhuangzian tales as well as Daoist- and Zen-inspired irony, puns, and oblique observations in combination with Western insights, or, as he puts it himself, “somewhat bland Germanic thought-ingredients” (p. 12).

This book, a “tractatus poetico-philosophicus,” as the author calls it, could be read as a commentary on the ancient Daoist masters, in particular on Zhuangzi. But
it is a commentary à la chinois in that Wohlfart attempts, in a most trenchant manner, to apply their philosophical insights to contemporary issues and perspectives, offering poignant and often witty criticism of seminal Western-based views and values. At the same time, however, he rejects the unproductive partisan view according to which anything coming from the East will be presented as superior to the West. In fact, not only does he mix his reflections on the ancient Daoist thinkers with selected insights from Western thinkers such as Hegel, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein, among others; he also condemns severely any kind of esoteric Orientalism—in a style and manner much reminiscent of Nietzsche: “nothing is more repulsive than those para-religious gurus rolling around in the post-Christian meaning-vacuum, sprawling on the east-west couch, intoxicating their credulous disciples with enticing eso-cocktails, whereby they completely discredit an engagement with Asian thought” (pp. 38–39).

While he compares, in the opening sentence, his exploration with an “aimless morning stroll,” it is obvious that at least one of his objectives consists precisely in demystifying ancient Chinese philosophy by presenting it as an applicable and sensible (but not “rational”!) philosophy of life.

Wohlfart’s subtitle could be translated “Crazy Sketches of a Euro-Daoist Ethos Devoid of Morality.” Thus, the central theme has to do with ethics and morality, but, as indicated, it revolves around the idea of (localized) ethos as being prior to universal ethics and morality. He problematizes the Western penchant for universal rationalization that he sees epitomized in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Kant’s deontic ethics, he says, with its “pure theoretical practical reason, locks us inside a parallel universe of a universalism out of pure glass, inside a crystal bowl of formal idealism of action” (p. 226). Wohlfart sees in Kant’s philosophy a symptom of a culture that has been fixed on the mind, reason, and selfhood instead of trying to figure out how action occurs in real-life situations. One devastating consequence of this, Wohlfart notes, is the kind of hypocrisy that veils itself as universal ethics in order to justify aggressive actions resting on mere greed for wealth and power, such as the Bush administration’s war for “freedom and democracy” in Iraq.

The Daoist alternative to the Western obsession with rationality, according to Wohlfart, consists in training one’s sensibilities through action and interaction with one’s immediate environment. The model is found in the well-known Daoist artisans from the Zhuangzi, Cook Ding and others, who have mastered their skills to such an extent that they have become entirely effortless, spontaneous, smooth, and efficient. According to Wohlfart’s interpretation, these actions exemplify an art of life in an “extra-moral sense” as they concern a certain way to handle things, but they also indicate efficient moral action, that is, how best to act toward or interact with other people: “the art of action manifests itself as artisan know-how to deal with things as well as ethical know-how to deal with living creatures” (p. 229). A common feature of the artisans and the old swimmer, not to mention creatures such as the millipede, is that they are immersed in what they do, just as we are immersed in communal human living from the very day we are born. Why should we not be capable of developing our “moral” skills in a comparable manner by gradually refining our “feel” for each and every inter-human situation until we respond to novel situations with
the natural spontaneity that knows how to deal with them before we know it ourselves (in our mind)?

An important obstacle may be the inescapable fact that we communicate through language, which Wohlfart tackles from a Daoist point of view, playing with language himself in order to overcome it. We tend to let language, its words, explicit notions, and grammatical structures dominate our approach to the things themselves. The words linger in our minds and can sediment there, creating principles, reifications, categories, systems, and dogmas that prevent us from evaluating each and every particular situation on its own terms. In Zhuangzi’s terms, words are like certain ancient Chinese measure-goblets, *zhi*卮, that turn over as soon as they are full, empty their content, and then adjust themselves again in an upright position—but now empty: “The content is the meaning or sense of the word. The meaning of the word depends on its use, on the everyday context of events. This context is fluctuating” (p. 57). If we prevent the measure-goblet from turning over, as it is meant to do when full, it will simply overflow. The excessive focus on reason derives from such a conceptual cage inside which we willingly lock ourselves. Is it because we cannot handle the natural indeterminacy of life? Does it take too much effort—indeed, courage—to overcome the necessary vagueness of real situations? Rules and principles may be similar to words in that they are merely provisional rules of thumb that need be adjusted to every new situation. Taking rules as absolute is the easy way out: it oversimplifies reality, turns it into a coarse grid that fails to account for the fine nuances between circumstances that may seem comparable on the surface, but in fact would require different approaches.

Wohlfart argues that the analytical tendency in Western thinking to absolutize language, reason, and the will of the ego is detrimental to genuine ethical growth and maturity. Ethics, then, is a kind of skill that can only be developed through practice and training in real-life situations. In this regard, the art of action in an extra-moral sense is taken as an analogy for the art of action in a moral sense. But is this viable? Wohlfart finds his analogies in particular in everyday action and artisan skills, and he is, for instance, correct when he says that “it is best to forget one’s feet when one intends to run downstairs—in order to avoid falling downstairs” (p. 108). But the skill of walking may not be an appropriate analogy, for walking is too simple. Moreover, a child who has just started walking is indeed careful and conscious of where she places her feet. The same applies to adults while walking in unusual and uneven terrain. Carelessness could cause them to fall and hurt themselves. So what does this tell us about action in the inter-human sphere where we are continually encountering new and unusual terrain? It is not so clear whether the Daoist vision is particularly helpful in this regard.

In fact, the Confucian view, which Wohlfart seems to downplay (he is admittedly rather ambiguous in his opinion of Confucianism), may indeed be more sophisticated, and, perhaps, not as distant from the Daoist approach as Wohlfart often seems to suggest. After all, when Confucius describes his own developmental process, beginning with conscious learning and ending with the ability to give his “heart-and-mind (心) free rein without overstepping the boundaries,”2 is this not precisely what
Wohlfart has in mind? The “feel” and “acuity” of inter-human circumstances may require a rational kind of “technique” provided by ethics and morality before it can be obtained. As Wohlfart notes himself, Cook Ding acquires his “art” of cutting oxen without rational analysis after many years of training. But Cook Ding himself admits, at least implicitly, that adopting some such kind of technique (技) was a necessary stage in this development. He has simply “surpassed” or “developed beyond” (进) it. Before acquiring the ability to forget one’s feet while running downstairs, one must acquire the technique of walking—there has to be something there to forget.

Many, perhaps even most, Western ethical thinkers would not be averse to this view. John Stuart Mill, for instance, hoped that the utilitarian guidelines would eventually be internalized through moral cultivation so that some kind of refined “intuition” or “feel” for the situation would enable us to assess how to handle it correctly or appropriately. After all, and whether or not one accepts the utilitarian criteria, an ethical “feel” could be understood in a somewhat utilitarian fashion as an intuitive “calculative assessment” of the situation at hand. But Wohlfart’s point is certainly well taken. Somewhere along the way, rational rules, regulations, and technical criteria have come to dominate our ethical approach instead of being taken as useful crutches on our way to ethical self-cultivation—an indication that we may have lost that way.

Wohlfart’s final part, on “the others,” in particular his reflections on the Daoist wu 应 forms and his egological reflections on selflessness, is perhaps the most thought-provoking section of the book. The dominant place of the self, the ego, in the modern world is identified, correctly in my view, as one of its major ills. Spontaneous action, on the other hand, action that seeks to respond to the situation in an appropriate manner, presupposes not only an act of forgetting oneself but even others as well. It simply acts according to the needs of the situation. Excessive self-reflection and excessive consideration of others spoil the “sense” of one’s environment. Much in line with Zhuangzi, Wohlfart demands the reactivation of an ethical “instinct” in social life. But surely we cannot go back to the animal kingdom. We are already beyond that stage. And this is certainly not what Wohlfart means—nor is it what Zhuangzi meant, despite his belief that there is much that we can learn from animals. Here Wohlfart introduces an interesting Daoist-Hegelian philosophical construction (with a Heideggerian twist) of the ideal human modus vivendi by associating the Daoist wu-forms with the ego, will, action, intention, ratio, and emotion, but also with love. And the last may be the clearest case of them all: the “love-free love,” a kind of love that forgets itself as love, a love without an I, a spontaneous kind of love that corresponds to the Daoist wei 为无为, the act of non-action: “It is a passion-free [leiden-schaftsfreie], I-free, love-forgetting love in which the lovers forget each other together [miteinander vergessen].” It is, in fact, the sublation (Aufe- lung) of love (pp. 204–206). But clearly, according to Wohlfart, the key to all these sublations is the sublation of the self itself, leading to action and a way of life that is so-of-itself (ziran 自然), for, as it turns out, “the self itself is of-itself” [Selbst das Selbst is von-selbst] (p. 255).

Not only is Günter Wohlfart’s Die Kunst des Lebens und andere Künste sharp
and powerful in its expression; it also offers us a particularly timely and challenging meditation while facing the debris of a world torn asunder through the neoliberal glorification of the ego. Translations of this fine work into English and other languages, however difficult due to its subtle style, would be most desirable. Such translations, or, indeed, successive German editions, would further profit from the inclusion of Chinese characters in its many references to Chinese expressions from the philosophical classics. Their omission is, on occasion, somewhat of an obstacle to delving further into the fascinating sources employed by Wohlfart in this appealing and highly recommendable work.

Notes

1 – Camus wrote that “the age of philosophers concerned with philosophy was followed by the age of professors of philosophy concerned with philosophers” (Carnets 1942–1951, trans. Philip Thody [London: Hamish Hamilton, 1966], p. 44).

2 – Analects 2.4.


Reviewed by Mario Poceski  University of Florida

Linji Yixuan 臨濟義玄 (d. 866), also known as Rinzai in Japan, is one of the best-known historical figures associated with the Chan and Zen traditions of East Asian Buddhism. He is widely regarded as a paradigmatic exemplar of the novel type of iconoclastic Chan ethos—invented by a cluster of dynamic and charismatic Chan masters—that supposedly burst onto the Chinese religious scene during the glorious heyday of the Tang dynasty (618–907). Linji’s posthumous fame is largely based on the success of later generations of prominent disciples in transforming the Linji School 臨濟宗, which traced its spiritual ancestry back to him, into the dominant Chan faction and main representative of Chan orthodoxy, not only in China but also throughout the rest of East Asia. Much of the popular lore and iconoclastic imagery associated with Linji, along with the common knowledge about his life and teachings, are based on the Linji yulu 臨濟語錄 (Record of the sayings of Linji), a text composed during the Song era (960–1279). Ever since its initial compilation in the early eleventh century, Linji’s Record has enjoyed great popularity and revered status as an essential repository of timeless Chan wisdom, to which the numerous modern translations testify, including several different versions in both English and Japanese.

While the Linji yulu is conventionally regarded as a record of the life and teachings of Linji, in his important new book The Linji Lu and the Creation of Chan Ortho-
doxy: The Development of Chan’s Records of Sayings Literature, Albert Welter presents us with a fundamentally different way of looking at the text’s provenance and function. He argues that it is best to view Linji’s record of sayings as product of a protracted process of religiously inspired and ideologically inflected myth-making. At its core, this process involved the retroactive refashioning of Linji’s image as a prominent patriarchal figure, which was undertaken by the Linji School (or faction) in the course of its rise to unparalleled preeminence and power in the socio-religious world of Song China. Welter succeeds in compellingly telling the interwoven stories of the creation of a hagiographical narrative about an illustrious monk from the Tang era and the formation of a Chan movement that, to a large extent, established its claims to legitimacy by tracing its spiritual ancestry back to that same monk.

The book is primarily concerned with the complex literary processes and assorted historical exigencies—especially social and political circumstances, along with ideological imperatives—that shaped the gradual creation of a corpus of Chan writings centered on Linji. These relatively short texts underwent various changes and editorial revisions, until the compilation in the twelfth century of the standard version of the Linji yulu, which became widely circulated and was subsequently included in the Chinese Buddhist canon. By situating the creation of Linji’s record into a broader historical framework, the book also serves as a study of the evolution of the records of sayings (yulu 語錄) as a distinct literary genre that served as one of the linchpins of the new Chan ideology that developed during the Song era. As a result, Linji the man and his Tang context largely recede into the background. For the most part the book is also not concerned with the contents of his sermons or the doctrinal underpinning of his thought. On the whole, this is an excellent book that makes noteworthy contributions to the study of Chan history and literature, and sheds helpful light on the political, religious, and literary worlds of Song China. It nicely complements Welter’s outstanding Monks, Rulers, and Literati: The Political Ascendancy of Chan Buddhism (Oxford, 2006), and helps establish its author as one of the leading scholars in the field of Chan/Zen studies.

The main body of the book consists of five chapters, which are accompanied by an introduction and a conclusion. The first chapter explores the conception and nature of orthodoxy within the Chan tradition, as it was articulated by leading Chan teachers and framed in seminal texts, most of which were compiled during the early Song period. Welter introduces interesting perspectives on Chan’s broad historical trajectories during the late Tang, Five Dynasties (907–960), and Song eras, and points to the emergence of multiple conceptions of Chan orthodoxy. On the other hand, this is perhaps the weakest chapter in the book. Among other things, some of the initial discussions of modern Japanese constructions of Zen orthodoxy—centered on the dated writings of Suzuki Daisetsu 鈴木大拙—and their links with modern forms of Japanese nativism are a bit out of place (pp. 15–24). That is especially the case with the somewhat extensive summaries of Yanagita Kunio’s 柳田國男 study of Japanese folk culture and Motoori Norinaga’s 本居宣長 essentialist arguments about the pure Shinto heritage of Japan. Chapter 2 contains insightful analysis of the early origins of the records of sayings genre. After a useful discussion of the general definition and
basic characteristics of this genre, including its contents and form, Welter goes on to link the gradual development of the records of sayings literature with the Chan School’s fashioning of a distinct identity that highlighted its uniqueness vis-à-vis other Buddhist traditions. The whole process was purportedly to a large degree influenced by the concerns and predilections of the Song literati, many of whom embraced Chan as their favorite form of Buddhism.

The narrower focus on Linji’s written records starts in earnest in chapter 3, which explores the earliest textual fragments that allege to record Linji’s teachings and provide information about his life. Especially noteworthy is Welter’s astute analysis of the historical contexts and forces that affected the fluid communal remembrances of Linji’s life and teachings. That involved an ongoing refashioning of his religious persona via the creation or reworking of (presumably) fictional stories about him. Among the remarkable materials marshaled as evidence are the varied accounts about Linji’s early study with Huangbo 黃檗 (d. 850?), traditionally regarded as his main teacher. These and other related stories changed over time in ways that reflected the evolving ideological orientations and institutional needs of the nascent Linji School, which was in the process of constructing its identity as a distinct branch of the larger Chan movement that represented the main line of orthodox transmission. The highlighting of his somewhat tentative association with Huangbo was an important step in bolstering Linji’s spiritual pedigree, as that made him a direct descendant of the supposedly orthodox line of transmission that went back to the illustrious Mazu Daoyi 馬祖道一 (709–788), whose Hongzhou School 洪州宗 came to dominate the Chan movement during mid-Tang period.

In chapter 4, the shortest of the five chapters, the focus of attention shifts to the compilation of the Linji yulu, which exists in two similar versions (compiled in 1029 and 1120). The author treats the text as a significant element in a campaign aimed at promoting a distinctive form of Chan orthodoxy centered on the burgeoning Linji School, and explores the reasons and implications of the different arrangements of the contents of the two versions of Linji’s record of sayings. Finally, chapter 5 links the creation of Linji’s fragmentary records and the development of the records of sayings genre. That involved a noteworthy move from conventional sermonizing to interactive verbal (and physical) exchanges of the kind that became epitomized by the encounter dialogues of classical Chan lore. Welter points to the fictional background of the popular encounter dialogues and argues that Chan records such as the Linji yulu are primarily literary artifacts, rather than verbatim records of the teachings and acts of noted monks from the Tang era. Their creation underscored the increasing popularity of the encounter dialogues as a quintessential Chan form that supposedly conveyed the essence of enlightenment. The chapter also includes a discussion of the development of chuanqi 傳奇, short fictional tales about marvelous occurrences that became popular in literati circles. Although the consideration of these tales might be relevant or interesting in other contexts, here it is somewhat superfluous, given that the author is not able to establish any direct connections between the literati’s writing of these tales and the formation of the records of sayings genre, although Welter’s main point about the fictional character of the encounter dialogues is quite compelling.
Most of the materials presented in the book were originally developed as independent papers that were presented at various conferences, and parts of it have already appeared in print (see p. xi). While these discrete parts are products of superb research and are for the most part well written, at times their overall integration into a conceptually and thematically coherent volume leaves some room for improvement. For instance, there are a number of unnecessary repetitions and superfluous arguments, which seem to indicate that the putting together of the book as a whole was a bit rushed. Especially striking are the almost verbatim repetitions of fairly long sections in different parts of the book. A case in point is the first paragraph on page 82 (top half of the page), which simply repeats a number sentences that appear on pages 3 and 4. There is even more of the same kind of verbatim repetition on pages 135–137, which basically duplicates whole paragraphs that already appeared on pages 87–89.

Nevertheless, this is an excellent book that makes substantial contributions to the field of Chan studies. The author should be commended on his careful historical and textual analyses, as well as his firm grasp of primary and secondary sources, especially the publications of leading Japanese scholars such as Yanagida Seizan 柳田聖山. Nonetheless, given the nature of the available sources and the complexity of the subject matter, it should not come as too much of a surprise that one might take issue with some of his interpretations of particular texts or topics, or disagree with the some of his judgments and assumptions. Among the book’s shortcomings is a pervasive tendency to overstate the roles of political considerations and social factors in the formulation of Chan teachings or the compilation of texts that affirmed specific visions of Chan orthodoxy. The author tends to put emphasis on the pervasive influences of the government and the literati on the institutional growth of Chan and the public presentation of its soteriological formulations, at the expense of considering the inner religious dynamics that shaped the ongoing evolution of Chan teachings and practices.

Undoubtedly, political expediency, economic patronage, and social prestige were prominent factors in the shaping of Chan history. However, an overly cynical reading or construal of that history might be almost as one-sided as the familiar normative narratives and apologetic accounts, which paint an unduly romanticized picture of a unique religious tradition led by extraordinary virtuosi, dedicated to the pursuit of supreme wisdom and the transmission of the essence of Buddhist enlightenment. There might more to (some of) the teachings presented in Chan texts such as the Linji yulu than the kind of ideological posturing that has been noted by modern scholarship. We might also want to consider the internal logic of their doctrinal formulation and practical prescriptions, and perhaps be a bit more open to the possibility that genuine religious convictions or pieties were also involved in the initial formulation and ensuing diffusion of Chan teachings, which primarily took place within the context of monastic communities. To some extent Welter is aware of these issues and concerns, and at times he adds pertinent caveats and qualifications. Here, I am basically raising the question of appropriate balance and perspective—which is applicable to much of recent American scholarship on the subject—rather than suggesting serious inadequacy in the overall interpretive approach taken by Welter.
I am afraid I cannot fully agree with Welter’s assertion that the story of the *Linji yulu* is not the story of Linji the man, but a story of the later movement that created the text. It is both. It is true that Linji’s life is to some extent shrouded in mystery—probably a reflection of the fact that during his lifetime he was a relatively minor figure within the broader Chan movement—but recent publications, which include two books on the Hongzhou School, have demonstrated that there was much more to Tang Chan than is sometimes assumed by some Western scholars. Accordingly, this book would have benefited if the author had taken a bit more seriously the lively socioreligious milieu of Tang Chan, in which Linji and the people around him were active participants, and which produced the earliest records of his teachings in a literary format that was prevalent at the time.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned caveats and limitations, I would like to end this review by stressing that this is a remarkable book that should be required reading for all serious students of Chan/Zen history and literature. Welter’s study goes a long way toward dispelling entrenched misunderstandings and quixotic imaginings about key aspects of Chan Buddhism. Besides illuminating the complex textual history of Linji’s record of sayings, the book also enhances our understanding of the complex changes that marked the Chan movement’s distinct historical trajectories during the Tang-Song transition. It is also highly recommended for anyone interested in the intersections between Buddhism and the literary, political, and social milieus of Song China.

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Reviewed by Yuet Keung Lo National University of Singapore

Despite a recent resurgent interest in traditional Chinese classics in the Chinese speaking world, the work of Mengzi seems to be neglected. Kongzi (Confucius), the master of Confucianism, appears to monopolize the limelight. Thus, Professor Bryan Van Norden’s new English translation of the *Mengzi* should be received with great delight. It has the added value of including parts of insightful commentary of the Neo-Confucian master Zhu Xi, which was required reading for the civil service examination in China from 1313 to 1905. Van Norden also interweaves his own comments throughout the translation, sometimes illuminating both Zhu Xi’s insights and the text of the *Mengzi* at once; altogether, he proves himself to be a reliable guide.

Van Norden’s work is lucid, readable, and easily accessible to the layperson. The Introduction, in particular, was clearly written with a general audience in mind. In addition, the translation comes with a convenient English-Chinese glossary that explains the basic meaning of key terms in the *Mengzi* and gives references to where a particular term is used in the text. One cannot help but see Van Norden’s confident experience as a college professor at work. He discusses virtually every important
aspect, historical and philosophical, that is indispensable for the lay reader to understand Mengzi’s philosophy.

Yet certain issues appear to lack proper contextualization. For instance, while Van Norden tells his readers “Mengzi situates his philosophical anthropology in a broader worldview” (p. xxxvii), they do not know why Mengzi would do that, what a worldview entails, and whose worldview was not as broad as his. They are also informed that “Mengzi sometimes treats Heaven as almost identical with the natural (and amoral) course of events” (p. xxxviii), but they do not know how Mengzi’s idea of Heaven would be different from a totally natural and amoral course of events. This neglected comparison seems to be critical in defining who Mengzi was as a philosopher.

Factual errors also find their way into the Introduction. For instance, Van Norden says that Zhu Xi “approvingly cites Cheng Yi’s view on Analects 17.2, which categorically identifies the term xing 性 (human nature) as nature endowed in qi 氣” (p. xliii). However, this is not how Zhu Xi understands it. Right at the beginning of his commentary, Zhu clearly says, “Human nature here includes qi endowment as well. Natures as embodied in qi of course vary in their qualities. Yet insofar as their beginning is concerned, they are not quite far apart.” In other words, Zhu takes xing in this context to signify both nature as Pattern (li 理) and nature endowed in qi.

It is little known that Zhu Xi had a special method of exegesis in his Collected Commentaries to the Four Books. He first presents his own view, which he believes is faithful to the original meaning of the text. In elucidating this view, he may cite from other scholars. If he finds any other interpretation that could illuminate the text even though it does not unravel its original meaning, he attaches it at the end of his own view, with a little circle to demarcate it from the “faithful” reading. In the case of Analects 17.2, Zhu Xi no doubt disagrees with Cheng Yi, whose view is placed after a little circle, because to him xing in this context includes both the original nature of humans and their natures endowed in qi. Nonetheless, he considers Cheng Yi’s view inspiring and useful in reminding readers of the distinction between original nature and nature endowed in qi. Thus, Van Norden’s statement is misleading at best and, strictly speaking, erroneous.

Van Norden’s error partly results from his ignorance of the said exegetic principle in Zhu Xi’s nuanced, multilayered commentary, and in reality he consistently conflates the interpretations of distinctive nature assembled in Zhu Xi’s Collected Commentaries into one grand exposition in his own running commentary. His inclusion of Yin Tun’s remarks in 2B1.5 and 2B3.5 are but two examples. While this may not be a substantive issue in a philosophical translation for the general reader, it is a fundamental error in traditional Chinese textual criticism and in Zhu Xi studies.

Van Norden is correct in pointing out that Zhu Xi misinterprets Mengzi’s agricultural metaphor of the four sprouts, and he dutifully tries to give credit to Philip Ivanhoe for this insight. However, while Ivanhoe may be “the first to note how Zhu Xi’s interpretation alters Mengzi’s key metaphor” in the English speaking world (p. xliii n. 41), the insight in question was first revealed by Qian Mu in 1964. Overall, Van Norden’s translation is reliable and fluent, despite minor errors.
Rather than listing inaccuracies in textual reading such as rendering *cong kundi* 從昆弟 (cousin) as “younger brother” in 2B2.3, which may be insignificant in a philosophical translation, I wish to focus on what I would call over-philosophizing in Van Norden’s translation. Take, for example, *Mengzi* 4B2.6. Parts of his translation read:

Zengzi said, “The wealth of Jin and Chu cannot be equaled. They have their wealth, I have my benevolence. They have their official ranks, I have my righteousness. What should I be dissatisfied about?” How could Zengzi state this if it were not righteous (yi 義)? It is certainly one aspect of the Way (dao 道). (p. 29)

The word *yi* in Mengzi’s comment does not denote “righteousness”; it carries no philosophical connotation here. Rather, it literally means “appropriate” or simply “right” (namely, doing what is appropriate) in this context. Similarly, the meaning of the last line in the quotation is quite straightforward; it means, as Zhu Xi literally translates it, “there is perhaps a reason in this” (是或別有一種道理也). The term *dao*, like *yi*, does not really mean “way” here, much less “Way” as Van Norden translates it. Mengzi was talking about the reasoning or rationale of Zengzi’s declaration and position regarding *de* 德 (Virtue). He thinks Zengzi was doing what is right (*yi*), and there was perhaps a good reason behind it.

It is common to find terms of ordinary usage in classical Chinese that could take on philosophical significance in a given context, and these include *ren* (benevolence), *yi* (righteousness), *dao* (way), *li* 理 (pattern), and the like. It would be inappropriate to treat them as philosophical concepts invariably. Yet Van Norden tends to commit to such an over-philosophizing position in his reading of the *Mengzi* and Zhu Xi’s commentary. His translation of *yi* and *dao* in 4B2.6 is a case in point. There are numerous other examples, and the most notable is his invariable translation of *li* as “Pattern” even when it was clearly not used in a Neo-Confucian technical sense (see, e.g., 2B3.5 and 2B5.5).

The quibbles above by no means detract from Professor Van Norden’s remarkable translation. Indeed he has done a great service to keep Mengzi alive in the English speaking world. He makes the *Mengzi* interesting to lay readers; perhaps he may even help them see its relevance to the contemporary world (see, e.g., his comment on Mengzi’s view on filial obedience in 4A28, and, of course, his passionate appeal to the readers in the very last paragraph of the book). I am certain that for years to come many college students will be indebted to him for their initiation to the philosophy of Mengzi.

Notes


3 – Qian Mu, “Cong Zhuzi Lunyu zhu lun Cheng Zhu Kong Meng sixiang qidian” (A discussion based on Zhu Xi’s Commentary to the *Analects* of the differences between Cheng

4 – In fact, the identity of Meng Zhongzi is not specified in the Mengzi, but the Han exegete Zhao Qi 趙岐 identified him as Mengzi’s cousin. See Zhu Xi, Sishu zhangju jizhu, p. 242.

5 – The term “righteousness” is listed in the Glossary (p. 205) as a philosophical term.

6 – D. C. Lau translates the last three lines of Mengzi 4B2.6 as follows: “In what way do I suffer in the comparison? If this is not right, Tseng Tzu would not have said it. It must be a possible way of looking at the matter.” See D. C. Lau, trans., Mencius (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 87. I think Lau captures the meaning and tone of the text accurately.


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Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings, with Selections from Traditional Commentaries is an excellent new translation of the Zhuangzi. Brook Ziporyn has produced an abridged and annotated edition of the classic for Hackett’s growing series of translations on early Chinese intellectual history. The closest competitors to this new edition are the translations by Watson (1968), Graham (1981), and Mair (1994). Ziporyn’s work succeeds in part because he manages to do both less and more than the others. With judicious abridgement (sixteen full chapters, including all seven “Inner” chapters, plus selections from six more—about two-thirds of the entire work) and valuable added commentary, this book is a great choice for the undergraduate classroom. Scholars will also find this a valuable addition to their shelves. The translation often provides a fresh perspective to old problems, and the selection of commentary delivers a focus and accessibility that engages—and encourages us to re-engage—the considerable commentarial tradition.

There are four parts to this text to be considered: the brief introduction, the four online explanatory essays, the translation, and the selections from traditional commentaries.

The twelve-page Introduction begins with the historical, ends with the philosophical, and finally points the reader to the online essays. The closing section of the Introduction, “Multiple Perspectives of the Inner Chapters,” rather than attempting to “sum up” the Zhuangzi, instead describes a variety of points of view that Zhuangzi the author seems to take. The apparent contradictions are resolved in the longest of the online essays, “Zhuangzi as Philosopher,” where Ziporyn gives us an insightful analysis of the problem: the Zhuangzi is justifiably notable not only for pointing out (ontological and psychological) dependence and relativity, but also for embracing and celebrating the transformations between (necessarily limited) perspectives. It is precisely here that the famous phrase from chapter 1, “the Consummate Person has no fixed identity” (至人無己) (p. 6), finds its meaning.
The remaining three online essays are shorter and deal with translation issues, the categorization of the text’s chapters by A. C. Graham and Liu Xiaogan, and the use of the term dao 道 in the Laozi, which Ziporyn situates between earlier (Confucian and Mohist) and later (Zhuangzian) uses. This last brief essay, introducing the counterintuitive and “ironic” use of the term dao, would be a useful assignment for students before reading either text.

Ziporyn’s translation stands up well against those of his predecessors. Sometimes it is more colloquial, as with “The Equalizing Jokebook” for Qi xie 齊諧 (p. 1), and “this Peng has quite a back on him” (p. 1). The latter example does not translate anything in the Chinese, and such additions are usually for clarification, but in rare instances I found them slightly puzzling, as with the addition of “or anything in a man” in “Is human life always this bewildering, or am I the only bewildered one? Is there actually any man, or anything in a man, that is not bewildered?” (p. 11). Sometimes the translation seems a little idiosyncratic. Dao, for example, is rendered as “course,” a compromise between Chad Hansen’s “guiding discourse” and the standard “way.” I think this works better in theory than in practice, however, because “course” sounds odd in some sentences, for example when Confucius says to the cicada catcher, “How skillful you are! Or do you have a course?” (p. 78). And the logic behind the inconsistent use of the uppercase for words like C/course, H/heaven, and S/sage was not always obvious to me from the context, and might prove distracting to undergraduates, even after being reminded that Chinese has no such distinctions.

But these are small matters. Much more often, the translation is a delight. Ziporyn’s lucid prose is often a marked improvement over his predecessors:

Since he receives his sustenance from Heaven, what use would he have for the human? He has the physical form of a human being, but not the characteristic inclinations of a human being. Since he shares the human form, he lives among men. Since he is free of their characteristic inclinations, right and wrong cannot get at him. Minute and insignificant, he is just another man among the others. Vast and unmatched, he is alone in perfecting the Heavenly in himself.2 (p. 38)

Footnotes are more plentiful than in the previous translations and are especially helpful with a text like the Zhuangzi. Shorter notes often provide background and explanatory information, as with the note on Song Rongzi in chapter 1 (p. 5 n. 9). Longer notes engage previous readings of a passage and defend Ziporyn’s own understanding and translation, as with the passage, considered spurious by Graham and Mair, that ends with “He [i.e., the sage] may lose his life without losing what is most genuine to him, but he is not being a ‘man devoted to service’”3 (p. 41 n. 10).

The selections from traditional commentaries are the most innovative feature of this translation, in keeping with Edward Slingerland’s Analects and Bryan Van Norden’s Mengzi translations (also from Hackett). Ziporyn provides extracts from forty-seven commentators that offer valuable contextualization as well as a variety of perspectives from which to approach the text. Guo Xiang starts right off in chapter 1 with his signature exegesis of the “spontaneous attainments” (自得) of each being (p. 129). Wang Fuzhi, as if the opening metaphors of this chapter were not perspective-
expanding enough, introduces the chapter by saying “All can be wandered in—indeed, all are nothing but this wandering”\(^4\) (p. 129). Shi Deqing connects the vastness of the Northern and Southern oceans to the vastness of the Dao, and then goes on to assert that “without the vastness and depth of the Great Course, the fetus of the great sage cannot be gestated”\(^5\) (p. 130), which provides an excellent starting point for both Buddhist and Daoist hermeneutics. Aside from introducing new interpretive concepts, the commentaries can also serve to explain the continuity of the text, particularly when this is not immediately apparent. The comments of Shi Deqing on the end of chapter 1, for example, conceptually unite the pericopes on Song Rongzi, Liezi, Xu You, and the Spirit-Man on Mt. Guye (pp. 131–134).

There are very few typos, “Qu Boyu” 鬘伯玉 inexplicably changing to “Peng Boyu” (p. 29) probably being the only notable one. The bibliography could have included more articles in English for the undergraduate looking to write a paper, but overall Ziporyn’s translation is smooth, clear, and accurate, his notes are helpful, and his commentary selections bring new and welcome dimensions to the text as textbook and as an aid for scholarly research.

Notes

1 – 人之生也，固若是芒乎？其我獨芒，而人亦有不芒者乎？

2 – 既受食於天，又惡用人！有人之形，無人之情，有人之形，故屬於人，無人之情，故是非不得於身。眇乎小哉，所以屬於人也！謷乎大哉，獨成其天！

3 – 亡身不真，非役人也.

4 – 無不可遊也，無非遊也.

5 – 非大道之淵深廣大，不能涵養大聖之胚胎.