



Rein Raud

ASIAN WORLDVIEWS

Religions, Philosophies, Political Theories

WILEY Blackwell

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Preface

The aim of this book is to acquaint its reader with the rich thought traditions of Asia (India, China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, and South East Asia), which have mutually influenced each other throughout history and consequently share large parts of their intellectual heritage. It can serve both as an introductory textbook for the future specialist and as a source of background knowledge for those whose primary interest lies outside Asian studies, be it religious studies, Western philosophy, political science or anything else. No previous knowledge of the history or cultures of this region is presupposed, entanglement in specific debates is avoided and names and terms have been kept to the minimum. If you think that an educated person anywhere in the world should know who are St Augustine, Luther, and Mother Theresa or Aristotle, Kant, and Wittgenstein or Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Marx, or what is the meaning of ‘cardinal sin’, *cogito*, and ‘separation of powers’, the names and terms printed bold in this book are those you should be familiar with from a range of Asian points of view. I have done my best to keep the scope of the book equally balanced throughout and to maintain a more or less similar level of coverage in all areas. The book thus addresses all teachings, schools, and individuals that have usually been included in the range of such introductory intellectual histories. However, the reader will notice that some authors and ideas not always present in similar overviews, such as feminist theorists, have been given more space here than has been customary up to now.

The worldviews described in this book influence the choices and actions of the people who currently make up about one half of the world’s population. This alone is reason enough to be interested in Asia, but there is more. Having been economically handicapped for over a century by Western domination and inefficient, if not directly harmful domestic politics, Asian countries have now emerged to form the world’s most quickly developing region, one that can no longer be excluded from global decision-making. Culturally, geographically and politically, Asia is perhaps more diverse than any other part of the world. Dominated by two ancient, multilayered, and rich civilizations, India and China, this region is the home of some of the world’s oldest and worthiest literary and philosophical cultures, theatrical traditions, and aesthetic systems. So undoubtedly at least some

knowledge of Asian worldviews is necessary for anyone with an interest in the world beyond one's own home ground, were it for cultural history or current political and economic affairs.

Of course, traditional opposition pairs such as 'east-west' always rely on simplifications. Norway differs from Portugal and Texas from Scotland perhaps more significantly than Singapore from Vancouver. Moreover, for the purposes of this book the 'West' includes also a large portion of what most Westerners consider to be in the East, namely the Islamic world. This may seem strange, because religious wars throughout centuries and recent political conflicts as well as European colonial presence in the 'Orient' have shaped the image of Muslims for most Westerners as the Other, whose cultural and social habits are incompatible with 'Western values'. However, historically and etymologically, Islam is most certainly a part of 'Western' culture, sharing both in the traditions of Greek antiquity – which it actually preserved for Europe during the times when the West was militantly fundamentalist – and the Judaic legacy of monotheism. Muslims themselves have always felt a unity with other 'people of the Book', that is, those whose religion is based on the foundations of the Old Testament, and Islamic thought has exercised a decisive influence on Western intellectual history through the work of such thinkers as, for example, Ibn Rushd (Averroes) or Ibn Sina (Avicenna). Thus, even though Islam is prominently present also in Asia, it is treated there as a Western import that has taken on local colour, but nonetheless has its roots elsewhere – not unlike Christianity or Marxism. The reader who would like to be better informed about the teachings of Islam will find a few suggestions in the section of further reading recommendations at the back of this book.

As a result, the term 'Asia' does not refer in this book to the entire geographical range that includes also the Middle East, the majority of the territory of Russia and the former Soviet republics of central Asia, but only to those parts of Asia that are usually addressed in publications dedicated to 'Asian religions', 'Asian philosophies', and 'Asian politics', namely south, east and southeast Asian countries as well as Tibet. More attention has been dedicated to the two most ancient civilizations of Asia, India and China, as well as to Japan as the first successful modernizing country to have emerged from outside the traditional West. Smaller subchapters have been dedicated to Korea, Tibet, Indic South East Asia and Vietnam, not because their intellectual contributions would be less valuable, but largely due to the fact that these regions have, for historical reasons, had less impact on the global processes and the interest in their intellectual history has been mostly academic up to the present.

There are quite a few good introductions to the religions, philosophies and political ideologies of each of the countries and regions that this book deals with, but most of the time these different types of convictions and beliefs are kept separate. However, as soon as we leave the Western cultural environment, the division of worldviews into 'religions', 'philosophies', and 'political theories' starts to obscure

more than it reveals. Philosophy and religion have been in a complicated relationship in the West, almost since their moment of separation, when Socrates was accused of disrespect for the gods, yet many Western philosophers, too, have been devoutly religious and have made significant efforts to bring their beliefs and their reasoning into harmony. Religions can seldom manage without a certain metaphysical grounding, and we often see them prompting rulers how to conduct their affairs properly. Political ideologies are always grounded in theories of justice and ideas about the course of history, which are related to both the religious and the philosophical convictions of their proponents. It therefore makes sense, especially when stepping on unfamiliar ground, to highlight these connections rather than the divisions, and to treat worldviews as holistic, even if they occasionally seem incoherent to us – they seldom do to the people whose lives they guide.

But we might want to go even further than that and question at the outset the very validity of the concepts ‘religion’, ‘philosophy’, and ‘ideology’ as such for a broader perspective. Most Westerners associate religion on a non-analytical level with belief in a god, or gods, which is grounded in a certain doctrine, one normally fixed in scriptures and upheld by an institution of spiritual professionals. Religions are also exclusive and make strong claims on the identity of the individuals who profess them, often causing distrust or even open hatred between religiously defined communities. Philosophy, in turn, is a kind of rational and conceptual inquiry into the first principles of how the world is, how we are in it, and how we should reason about things, while political theories and ideologies are sets of principles on which their proponents consider the build-up of society and its governing should be based – these principles can also be implicit and presented to the community as a sort of natural order, which nonetheless does not affect their ideological character.

All of these commonsensical assumptions are challenged to a certain degree by Asian worldviews. In fact, what is known as an Indian or Chinese religion and philosophy may not correspond to these tentative definitions at all. Quite a few so-called religions, such as early Buddhism or Confucianism, do not speak about any supernatural agency, others, such as Shintō, do not have doctrines of scriptures. Their institutions, like the huge Buddhist monasteries of pre-Islamic India, may appear more similar to what we call universities than to what look like monasteries from our point of view. And people can often identify with several religions at the same time in many regions of the area. Strangely enough, the term ‘religion’ is often forced on such worldviews that lack some, if not most of the characteristics many Westerners consider to be core properties of religion – such as the belief in a transcendent agency – while the label of ‘philosophy’ is being denied to sophisticated conceptual constructions because they lack some particular element that the critic considers crucial, even though there are Western thinkers, who are legitimately called philosophers and lack that same element as well.

The entanglement of different intellectual pursuits is also one of the reasons why the book is organized according to a historical principle rather than treating

worldviews such as Buddhism or Confucianism one by one. Asian worldviews are more often than not lacking in the type of jealousy that characterizes Western religions, and ideas, motifs, and practices migrate relatively freely over their borders. Thus, for example, the Japanese Shintō took shape as a kind of an institution only when the Dao creed had entered Japan from China, and the Dao creed itself had been inspired to do the same by Buddhism, which had been imported to China from India. A treatment by tradition might perhaps encourage us to emphasize the borders between them, while progressing along the historical timeline makes it easier to trace borrowings and influences and to understand how and why the worldviews developed in the way they did.

Another related problem that often occurs in literature is the separation of classical heritages from the ideas of the present. Excellent books on traditional thought seldom venture to see it reflected in modern ideas, and brilliant analyses of new views often summarize their classical origins in succinct introductions and then proceed to treat the thinkers of the last 150 years exclusively in the context of Western discourses. These have undeniably played a decisive role in the development of present-day Asian societies and their worldviews, but the ways how all these Western discourses have been received, interpreted, and modified can hardly be understood without a sufficient knowledge of past thought systems. It could be said that many people in contemporary Asia operate with parallel conceptual structures in which traditional ideas and Western notions are used side by side. A treatment of Asian ways of thought as simply local and possibly imperfect versions of universal patterns best exemplified by Western cultures is not only racist and imperialist, it is also quite wrong. Asian ideas have been in dialogue with Western thought in the past and should be doing so also in the future, and mutual understanding between structurally different cultures should start with an open approach to the other. This book is for those who would like to take the first step on this way and I can only hope that it will inspire its readers to pursue their study of Asian worldviews forward to higher levels of competence.

The transcription of Indian names and terms is given in a simplified spelling, thus Shankara instead of Śaṅkara and Vishishtādvaita instead of Viśiṣṭādvaita, given that the nuances of pronunciation indicated by these diacritics are largely ignored also by advanced readers of Indian texts. Unlike in many texts that use a simplified spelling, the distinction between short and long vowels is maintained and the reader is encouraged to make note of it. Chinese terms and names have been written in the pinyin transcription unless used in a different form by the persons in question, Japanese terms and names are given in the modified Hepburn transcription, Korean names are given in the Revised Romanization system, with the exception of widespread family names such as Kim and Pak/Park. Vietnamese names appear in the quoc ngu Latin script without the diacritics, Tibetan names in phonetic approximations regularly used in literature.

Unless indicated otherwise, all translations of quoted source texts are my own.