

Chapter 2

The Possibility and Costs of Responsibly Teaching East Asian and Buddhist Philosophy

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In *Taking Back Philosophy*, Bryan Van Norden argues that members of philosophy departments in the U.S. should diversify their curricula to include more than just Anglo-European thought.¹ I concur with Van Norden that such diversification is a good worth realizing. Nonetheless, more needs to be said to derive substantive normative conclusions from this evaluative presupposition. The purpose of this chapter is to make progress towards some of those conclusions. Specifically, I argue for the feasibility of responsibly teaching a more diverse philosophy curriculum, especially for those philosophy instructors who teach the bulk of philosophy in undergraduate classrooms.

In particular, I have in mind those who teach at community colleges, small liberal arts institutions, and non-flagship state schools including adjuncts and temporary faculty.² Many—and I speculate most—of such instructors teaching at the undergraduate level in the U.S. have no graduate preparation in non-Anglo-European philosophy. I focus on those teaching at these schools on the assumption that such schools have fewer, if any, opportunities to hire a person with graduate equivalent training in non-Anglo-European philosophy.³ Absent such opportunities, the curriculum at such schools can only be diversified by the teachers there.

Without such graduate preparation (or some equivalent) these philosophers might infer that they cannot responsibly teach such philosophy in their undergraduate classes. And, given the cost of receiving such training, their lack of formal training in the area may seem to justify their choice not to teach it. I presume that Van Norden would be sympathetic to these concerns, as he

himself justifies his focus on Chinese philosophy in *Taking Back Philosophy* as follows: “I can only responsibly discuss the areas in which I claim competence.”⁴

Though sympathetic to this line of reasoning, I think it rests on dubitable premises. That is, even without graduate-equivalent preparation many such philosophers *can* responsibly teach non-Anglo-European philosophy in their undergraduate classes. And the sort of preparation that *is* required can be done by many (though not all) without compromising professional success.

Before proceeding to the argument, a few remarks on the scope of the chapter are in order. First, whereas non-Anglo-European philosophy includes a wide variety of traditions, I will primarily speak to the feasibility of responsibly teaching philosophy from ancient and imperial China and, to a lesser extent, the broader Sinosphere.⁵ This is due to my comparative unfamiliarity with other parts of philosophy and the learning opportunities that exist for them. Nonetheless, if my arguments in this chapter are successful, readers who are familiar with other philosophical traditions (such as traditions of the Indian subcontinent) may substitute in, *mutatis mutandis*, details about those traditions into the remarks that follow and see what results. Though I am optimistic they will succeed, optimism is a poor substitute for evidence.

Here’s a brief overview of what is to come. In Section I, I introduce some principled reasons we might think graduate-equivalent preparation is required to teach some non-Anglo-European philosophy. In Section II, I argue that none of these considered reasons obtain in general for those who teach philosophy yet lack graduate-equivalent preparation in non-Anglo-European philosophy. Finally, in Section III, I conclude with a discussion of some of the costs and benefits for individuals seeking to diversify their own teaching.

I. Why Graduate Equivalent Preparation Might Be Required for Responsible Teaching

Again, I reject the inference from a person's lack of graduate-equivalent preparation in East Asian or Buddhist philosophy to the thought that such a person cannot responsibly teach such philosophy to undergraduates. But what might justify such an inference? Perhaps a principle like:

GENERAL: No one can responsibly teach philosophical material for which they have not completed graduate-equivalent preparation.

But, if our everyday practices are any indication, such a principle is clearly false. Many departments have graduate students teach introductory material without having completed the course work for their graduate program. These departments, and these students, are not acting irresponsibly in doing so. Similarly, as happens at many small departments with long serving or adjunct faculty, philosopher's interests shift over time or in response to contemporary events. Such philosophers end up teaching a course for which they have no graduate training e.g., on philosophy of law or sport, the ethics of climate change or social media, or the meaning of life. And, again, such philosophers are not irresponsible for doing so.

Instead of a broad principle, we might claim something narrower:

EXCEPTIONAL: No one can responsibly teach East Asian or Buddhist philosophy for which they have not completed graduate-equivalent preparation.

This principle avoids dubious implications for everyday practice which GENERAL did not. But isn't it *ad hoc*? Only if there is no independent reason for accepting it. And comparative

philosophers have pointed out significant methodological differences between Chinese and contemporary Anglo-European philosophy. Henry Rosemont Jr. raises doubts that the methods of the Western intellectual tradition, e.g., philosophical analysis, hermeneutics, or phenomenology, are appropriate for many Chinese philosophical texts.⁶ Leah Kalmanson argues that “East Asian traditions are rarely confined” to the intellectual activities of Western philosophy such as “identifying premises, defining terms, making arguments, evaluating evidence, and drawing out conclusions or implications.”⁷ They additionally include rote memorization, meditation, and a diverse array of ritual practices.⁸ Such considerations provide independent reason for EXCEPTIONAL. Someone trained in Anglo-European ethics or philosophy of language can read a canonical text of philosophy of law, like H.L.A. Hart’s *The Concept of Law*, and immediately begin fully engaging with the text by identifying premises and arguments. But not so for Confucius’ *Analects* or the *Record of Linji*. Though these texts certainly do contain arguments with premises and terms, full engagement requires more. Further, well-meaning philosophers of the Anglo-European tradition who try to adopt Chinese textual strategies risk doing so in a piecemeal fashion and, per Kalmanson, becoming part of the problem of colonialization.⁹

II. Why Graduate Equivalent Preparation is Not Required for Responsible Teaching

I find EXCEPTIONAL reasonable. Yet, I also think it is false. There are plenty of classic texts in Chinese philosophy that can be engaged in an introductory class using the same methods of Anglo-European philosophy. As Van Norden points out, selections from the *Mozi* are well suited for a course unit on political philosophy.¹⁰ And readings from Mengzi and Xunzi could enhance

a course unit on human nature.¹¹ I may add that excerpts from Śāntideva's *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* would fit equally well. It would not be irresponsible to engage with such philosophy by looking for premises, identifying key terms, and reconstructing arguments.

Perhaps, however, this argument misunderstands the comparative philosophers' warnings. Namely, adding readings from East Asian and Buddhist philosophers as above fails to realize the value in studying those traditions of philosophy. It is to turn creative and insightful philosophical traditions into Anglo-European philosophy with Chinese (or Buddhist) characteristics. The curriculum is only worth diversifying insofar as that diversity includes methods beyond those found in Anglo-European philosophy. To fail to include a diversification of methods that correlate with diverse texts is not just to miss out on the value of these texts but to distort them as well. This concern is made clear when it comes to the role of meditation in Buddhism. Despite heterogeneous approaches to meditative practices across various Buddhist traditions, all take meditation as an important method involved in realizing the nature of things. If such a position is correct, then we cannot see a major line of support for Buddhist philosophical claims without meditation. As such, to teach Buddhist philosophy without teaching meditation is to present caricatured arguments. And it is irresponsible of philosophy instructors to caricature the arguments of those we teach. Even if Buddhist philosophers are incorrect about the evidentiary role of meditation, we beg an important philosophical question by not taking that position seriously.

I am unpersuaded by this objection. First, while methodological differences between Anglo-European and Chinese or Buddhist philosophy contribute to the value of diversifying the curriculum, they do not exhaust it. I think the aforementioned non-Anglo-European philosophers are also worth studying in virtue of the content of their ideas, the scope of their philosophical

projects, and the truths they reveal. Students have something to learn about language from Gongsun Long's "A White Horse Is Not a Horse" or metaphysics from Fazang's "Essay on the Golden Lion". And few, if any, texts match the inner chapters of the *Zhuangzi* for synthesizing argumentation with style and imagination. Using methods dominant in contemporary Anglo-European philosophy to engage with these texts may not completely realize their value, but it does realize some. Second, even if this were not so, there would remain an instrumental value to so engaging with these texts. If the intellectually curious first come to read the second chapter of the *Zhuangzi* or sections of Zhiyi's *Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra* via such methods, they will afterwards be better positioned to go further. Indeed, the nagging feeling that the standard methods of contemporary Anglo-European philosophy are inadequate to realizing the value of such texts may even motivate some students to do so. Third, in pedagogy, we can differentiate between distorting the value of a text by begging important philosophical questions or simplifying it to the point of caricature on the one hand and bracketing important philosophical questions for the sake of learning on the other. While the first *is* irresponsible (at least in most contexts), the second is responsible as it is necessary. To illustrate this point, consider any introductory course covering ethics. Such a course cannot begin without bracketing substantive questions in meta-normative theory, e.g. about normative semantics, epistemology, and metaphysics. Yet, so long as one is appropriately honest with students, doing so is not irresponsible. Fourth, this concern might not support EXCEPTIONAL. Pierre Hadot suggests that Ancient Greek philosophy involved spiritual exercises that go beyond looking for premises, identifying key terms, and reconstructing arguments.¹² If we allow that people can responsibly teach texts by philosophers from Ancient Greece, then we once again need to specify what makes Chinese and Buddhist philosophy a special case. If we deny that people can responsibly

teach Ancient Greek philosophy without such exercises, then we indict nearly every philosophy instructor and, it seems, the entire system by which we train graduate students to teach academic philosophy. This might be correct. A number of philosophy instructors have begun incorporating philosophical exercises that go beyond the standard intellectual activities of Western philosophy.¹³ However, if this sweeping indictment is correct, then EXCEPTIONAL once again follows as an unexceptional entailment.

Of course, the issue might not be whether diversifying the curriculum *has* a plurality of values to be realized, but whether those without graduate-equivalent training are up to the task of realizing that value. Without such preparation, instructors run a much greater risk of—even inadvertently—disrespecting or otherwise failing to do justice to the material. How so? One way has to do with the social meaning of using East Asian or Buddhist philosophy in this way within our context of Anglo-European dominance.

As I take it, this objection runs as follows: Our actions can have meaning just as much as our language. And the meaning of our actions isn't simply a matter of our intentions. For example, a guest in an unfamiliar culture might inadvertently make a hand gesture that disrespects their host. Even if the host excuses the guest due to their ignorance, the guest's action still had a disrespectful social meaning and the guest should be on guard against a repeat offense in the future. Furthermore, as Sally Haslanger notes, our actions have such meaning in virtue of their social context as part of our “culturally shared concepts, beliefs, and other attitudes”¹⁴ by which we “interpret resources and guide our interactions with each other and the material world”.¹⁵ The context in which U.S. philosophy instructors attempt to diversify the curriculum by teaching East Asian or Buddhist philosophy is one with a legacy of colonialism and racism giving rise to a host of stereotypes, many disrespectful, about the peoples of Asia and their

intellectual traditions. As such, without extensive preparation, an attempt to introduce philosophy from such traditions into the curriculum runs too great a risk of expressing these disrespectful stereotypes.

I do not challenge the conception of social meaning or interpretation of history on which this objection relies. Nor do I deny the normative import of respect. But while this objection applies to some modes of presenting East Asian or Buddhist philosophy, I do not think it holds for all those who lack graduate-equivalent preparation. That is, graduate-equivalent preparation is not necessary to identify and avoid the disrespectful modes of presenting (e.g., promoting disrespectful stereotypes or denigrating students who identify with an East Asian or Buddhist culture). Such stereotypes and possibilities for denigrating students exists within Western philosophy as well. All responsible instruction requires careful attention to the manner and context in which we present material. In support, I appeal to our shared experience as philosophy instructors. Consider the care that needs to be taken in discussing abortion, euthanasia, disability, or gender in a course covering issues in applied ethics or slavery in the teaching of Aristotle and Locke. But these are challenges that apply to teaching *in general* and not to diversifying the curriculum *per se*. And, so, such attention and care in presenting East Asian or Buddhist philosophical material does not require graduate-equivalent preparation in non-Anglo-European philosophy. Moreover, if we are considering the social meaning of our actions, we should pay special attention to the meaning of our individual *silence* on non-Anglo-European philosophy and its now conspicuous absence from our curriculum.¹⁶ If we are concerned about the risk of expressing disrespect, instructors may need to bear the risk of the occasional moral failure as the cost of correcting a greater historical and habitual failure.¹⁷

How do the preceding remarks apply to instructors in disciplines outside of philosophy?¹⁸ After all, the texts of Confucians, Mohists, Daoists, Legalists, and Buddhists are also of interest to historians, literary theorists, social scientists, and religious studies scholars. These instructors teach philosophy too, even if they do not teach it using the same methods, or with the same interests, as philosophers. So, if EXCEPTIONAL is true, then it would apply to them as well.

So much the worse for EXCEPTIONAL. To start, notice that some of the concerns which motivated EXCEPTIONAL simply do not apply to instructors in disciplines other than philosophy. Comparative philosophers point out that the methods of Western philosophy fail to realize the philosophical value of many Chinese and Buddhist texts. But instructors in other disciplines do not share the responsibility of philosophy instructors to realize the philosophical value of these texts. Rather, their responsibility is to realize the value of the text relevant to their discipline, e.g., its historical, literary, religious, sociological, or cultural value. In demonstrating such value, an instructor need not demonstrate the text's philosophical value (though they may).¹⁹

Furthermore, most of my remarks above generalize to those other disciplines as well. In their courses, these instructors outside of philosophy can realize (at least some of) the historical, literary, and cultural value of these texts and, with proper attention and care, can do so without distortion or disrespect. As I noted, teaching material respectfully is a challenge that applies to teaching in general and not just teaching as a philosopher. And the conspicuous absence of these texts from our curricula has social meaning, whether that curriculum belong to philosophy, history, social science, or literature.

With this, I rest my case against EXCEPTIONAL. While there's something to be said for such a principle, I think that it would be overbroad to apply it generally to instructors teaching Chinese or Buddhist philosophy without graduate-equivalent preparation. Nonetheless, working

through these arguments should remind us of the care each of us, as philosophy instructors, need to take in the presentation of our material.

III. Costs and Benefits of Responsibly Diversifying the Curriculum

Absent some principle like EXCEPTIONAL, we may presumptively conclude that a lack of graduate-equivalent preparation does not obstruct someone's ability to responsibly teach Chinese or Buddhist philosophy. Accordingly, *if* such considerations about responsible teaching are the decisive obstacle to someone's diversifying their own teaching, then they should go ahead. Yet other considerations may be relevant as well. I have not given an accounting of the *costs* of responsibly diversifying the curriculum, especially as they accrue for those who do the bulk of undergraduate philosophy instruction.

A responsible attempt to diversify the curriculum will require purchasing literature and communicating with established experts on the subject. These activities have straightforward monetary costs for the necessary material goods, e.g., travel expenses to meet with experts and the price of books. While we may hope that institutions will help defray such costs, a moment's attention to adjunct policies will reveal that hope as Panglossian for many. But the matter gets further complicated once we countenance those indirect opportunity costs. It is no small thing to ask an instructor on the job market or the tenure-track to set aside their efforts towards publication. And the threat of negative course evaluations resulting from forays into new material can reasonably chill the blood of adjuncts and visiting faculty.

I cannot give a full accounting of the costs of learning to diversify the curriculum for individual philosophy instructors. The contexts and constitutions of philosophy instructors vary

too widely to admit of any easy generalities. Each philosophy instructor will have to reflect and decide for themselves whether the costs of diversifying the curriculum outweigh the value of realizing it in their own teaching.

Nonetheless, I can provide some fodder for such reflection. My own experience learning to teach Chinese and Buddhist philosophy is some evidence of these costs, especially for those similarly situated (e.g. with similar privileges). Specifically, I will focus on my experience as it relates to the common currency of professional success: peer and student course evaluations, publications, and employment opportunities. If my experience is any indication, then there is some reason to think that the costs of diversifying one's own teaching, on this metric, are low. Moreover, the costs of diversifying one's teaching to one's professional success can be substantially offset by the benefits. In brief, diversifying my teaching has expanded my network of professional contacts, both within and outside of the field of philosophy, improved my course evaluations, and improved my prospects on the job market, at the cost of, roughly, a couple of publications. However, I note, my experience involves preparing to teach a full course rather than just a course module or smattering of material on non-Anglo-European philosophy.

Here's the set-up: I began preparations to teach Chinese and Buddhist philosophy as a two-year sabbatical replacement at a small liberal arts college. Due to hiring constraints, the department could not afford to hire any further faculty but desired to offer a Chinese philosophy class which had gone untaught since the retirement of a sinologist in the History department a few years earlier. To that point, my total exposure to Chinese philosophy had been a single undergraduate course taken in my first year of college—ironically from that retired sinologist. Nonetheless, in the spring semester of my first year, I agreed to teach a Chinese philosophy course the following spring.

To prepare, I applied to the annual summer *Institute on Infusing Chinese Studies into the Undergraduate Curriculum* offered by the Asian Studies Development Program (ASDP) jointly hosted by the East-West Center and the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. At the 10-day intensive institute, I studied under two philosophers working on Chinese philosophy and began to compile a list of texts and translations suitable for my undergraduates as well as more advanced secondary sources for myself. After returning from the institute, I reached out to the Chinese literature professor and sinologists working at my school to discuss both pitfalls and how my course might fit together with theirs. Throughout the rest of the summer, and during the breaks of the fall semester, I read translations of primary texts, sometimes multiple translations, secondary literature, and developed a syllabus with a straightforward historical structure (e.g., Confucius to Zhu Xi). Three summers later, I would return to the ASDP for a 4-week National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute on *Buddhist East Asia*, where I developed a syllabus on Buddhist Philosophy.

An immediate and continuing result of this preparation was a dramatic increase to my network of contacts both within and outside of the field of philosophy. In addition to the philosophers, sinologists, and literature professor mentioned above, I became involved in a transdisciplinary reading group on Buddhism—when I moved to another visiting position—where I met translators, scholars in Religious Studies, and more philosophers. I have also made contacts among my fellow participants at these summer institutes. In addition to benefitting my teaching, these contacts have served as professional references and given me opportunities to publish and present at conferences.

As for the courses themselves, they have been well received by peers and students alike. Indeed, that first Chinese philosophy course now marks a high point in my career evaluations.

Part of my own efforts to “quality control” was to invite these colleagues to sit in on my classes and give feedback. When they’ve generously done so, their remarks have been both positive and constructive.

My preparation has also been a benefit on the job market. Critics like Van Norden and Jay Garfield correctly worry that, in general, philosophy departments in the U.S. neglect non-Anglo-European philosophy. But a small yet significant number of departments desire faculty with the ability to teach non-Anglo-European philosophy (though this desire is often coupled with a desire for faculty who specialize in other areas such as applied ethics). For such departments, the ability to teach Chinese and/or Buddhist philosophy enhances the desirability of a faculty member, whether as a candidate in a job search or as current faculty seeking promotion. And, indeed, I was explicitly told that my preparation and experience teaching Chinese philosophy was a decisive factor in my being hired for my second visiting position (after the sabbatical replacement position mentioned above).

Of course, there have been costs. My time spent at summer institutes, reading secondary literature over two summers and a fall, winter, and spring break, and preparation of new material while teaching the course prevented me from working on articles for publication. Given my sense of how long it takes me to publish an article, from conception to completion, I estimate that diversifying my teaching has cost me around two publications.

By my own estimation, this has been well worth the cost. Professional success aside, I’ve found the process intellectually stimulating. I have also learned a great deal of history and more about religious practices, poetry, and art than ever before in my education. My hope in sharing my own experience goes beyond its evidentiary role in my argument. I also hope that my

experiences can serve as a rough guide for those who recognize the worth of diversifying the curriculum and wish to realize that value in their own teaching.²⁰

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¹ Bryan W. Van Norden, *Taking Back Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

² Trevor Griffey, “Decline of Tenure for Higher Education Faculty,” LAWCHA.org, accessed June 2nd, 2019, <https://www.lawcha.org/2016/09/02/decline-tenure-higher-education-faculty-introduction/>.

³ This assumption is not without support. As a survey of positions posted at Philjobs.org will attest, these schools, taken individually, do not post nearly as many job advertisements as R1 schools. Second, those who receive graduate training in non-Anglo-European philosophy comprise a much smaller proportion of those seeking philosophy positions.

⁴ Van Norden, *Taking Back Philosophy*, 38.

⁵ There is a danger here. Anne Cheng (2005) critiques those who engage with Chinese philosophy but “limit their scope to ancient thought” which is “tantamount to confining Chinese thought to the museum.” While my own experience focuses on historical Chinese philosophy, I emphasize that the scope of my argument is not limited to it.

⁶ Henry Rosemont Jr., “Translating and Interpreting Chinese Philosophy,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2019 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/chinese-translate-interpret>.

⁷ Leah Kalmanson, “The Ritual Methods of Comparative Philosophy,” *Philosophy East and West* 67, no. 2 (April 2017): 400.

⁸ Leah Kalmanson, “The Ritual Methods of Comparative Philosophy,” 401-2.

⁹ Leah Kalmanson, “The Ritual Methods of Comparative Philosophy,” 409.

¹⁰ Van Norden, *Taking Back Philosophy*, 61.

¹¹ Van Norden, *Taking Back Philosophy*, 66-8.

¹² Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises From Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Arnold Davidson (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1995).

¹³ For an illustrative example, consider: Natalie Helberg, Cressida J. Heyes, Jaclyn Rohel, “Thinking through the Body: Yoga, Philosophy, and Physical Education,” *Teaching Philosophy* 32, no. 3, (September 2009): 263-284.

¹⁴ Sally Haslanger, “Social Meaning and Philosophical Method,” *American Philosophical Association 110th Eastern Division Annual Meeting*, (December 2013): 15.

¹⁵ Sally Haslanger, “What is a (social) structural explanation?,” *Philosophical Studies* 173, no. 1 (January 2016): 126.

¹⁶ Yoko Arisaka (2000) considers how philosophy is sometimes conceived of as uniquely Western. But this conception is then subtly conflated with a conception of philosophy as concerning important questions (e.g. of ethics, reality, knowledge) in a Eurocentric manner. The conspicuous absence of non-Western philosophies may contribute to this insidious conflation.

¹⁷ As Ming-huei Lee (2018) notes, this historical failure partially consists of the delegitimization of Chinese philosophy. That is, even if we recognize that there is such a thing as Chinese philosophy, some doubt whether it provides anything of philosophical value.

¹⁸ I thank an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to explicitly address this point.

¹⁹ Does realizing these other sorts of values require graduate level training in alternative methodologies (e.g. Buddhist literary analysis or Chinese sociology)? Given the limits of my own experience and training, I can only speculate. In some cases, perhaps. But, not in all cases.

²⁰ I am grateful to Whitney Kelting, Leah Kalmanson, Sarah Mattice, Jacob Sparks, the editors of this anthology, and the audiences at the 2019 Eastern and Central Meetings of the American Philosophical Association for their helpful comments on this chapter.