
Educating Rita:
the case of Japanese Philosophy

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1. Educating Rita

Educating Rita is a play written by William Russell in 1980, and is shot into a film by director Lewis Gilbert in 1983.¹ The story is about Rita, a hairdresser who decided to study literature at the Open University with an ambition to change her life. Rita's tutor is Dr. Frank Bryant, who is an alcoholic lecturer with no enthusiasm over his teaching and research. At first, Rita failed to impress Dr. Bryant, who has once mentioned in a lecture that "why a grown adult wants to come to this place after putting in a hard day's work is totally beyond me." However, with a strong learning motivation and a serious attitude, she began to study well and impressed her tutor. At the end, Rita managed to pass the examination with distinction, while Dr. Bryant was proud of his student's achievement and decided to face new challenges in his own life.

Educating Rita can be seen as an excellent example of an interactive teaching experience: to teach is to be taught. In other words, teaching does not mean a knowledge transfer from an educated teacher to a non-educated student; rather, a teacher can actually learn a lesson from her/his students.

In this short essay, I shall discuss the difficulties in teaching Japanese philosophy as a discipline at university level, and share my experience of learning a lesson from one of my students in the course Japanese philosophy.

1. Japanese title of the movie: "リタと大学教授."

2. *Japanese philosophy and culture*

In the academic year 2009–10, I delivered a course on “Special topics in Eastern philosophy: Japanese philosophy,” which is believed to be the first university course on Japanese philosophy offered in Hong Kong. The course is divided into three units: first, an introduction to Japanese philosophy; second, on traditional Japanese philosophy (Buddhism, Confucianism, Shinto/Native studies); and third, on modern academic philosophy (Nishida Kitarō, Watsuji Tetsurō, Kuki Shūzō, etc.). The aim of this course is to provide an opportunity to understand Japanese culture through a critical reading of Japanese philosophical texts. Without doubt, Japanese culture is one of the sources of Japanese philosophy. Nonetheless, I found that it was extremely difficult to answer these two questions: What is Japanese culture? What is Japanese Philosophy?

Nowadays, one can easily name Japanese words such as *kimono*, *sushi*, *samurai*, *kamikaze*, *manga*, *anime* as some keywords of Japanese culture. Indeed, these Japanese words are well absorbed in English and in many other languages. Other representative words representing Japanese culture are *ukiyoe*, *haiku*, *nō*, *kabuki*, *judō*, etc. Needless to say, Japanese culture is not the sum of the keywords mentioned above, for culture is an ever-growing process and not an end-product. However, some key concepts can be useful for us to understand Japanese culture. For example, American cultural anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1887–1948) suggests two keywords for Japanese culture, i.e. *kiku* (菊) and *katana* (刀). These two words, meaning chrysanthemum and the sword, are related to *bushidō* (武士道). The term *bushidō* means “the way of the warrior,” which is the bodily and spiritual practice for war. In Edo period, *samurai* were required to learn seven martial arts: fencing, spearmanship, archery, horsemanship, *jujutsu* (now *judō*), firearms and military strategy. Although *bushidō* is no longer practised for actual warfare, it still remains as a part of Japanese culture. One may argue that *bushidō* is not philosophy. However, we can interpret *bushidō* in a philosophical way. Confucianism and Buddhist are important philosophies for us to understand Japanese culture.²

Similar to Japanese culture, Japanese philosophy is hardly an original philosophical tradition but a hybrid type with its sources from China, India, Europe, etc. In other words, Japanese philosophy is not homogeneous but heterogeneous. In the research of Japanese philosophy, one should be aware of the problem of Japanism. For example, if I have to answer whether Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) is a Japanese philosopher, I shall point out that he is a Japanese philosopher, but his philosophy is not Japanistic. Generally speaking, Nishida is regarded as the first philosopher in Japan. This praise came from Nishida's first critic, Takahashi Satomi (1886–1964). Although Takahashi was not satisfied with Nishida's philosophy, he admitted that Nishida is “the first and the only Japanese philosopher”³ in his era. Takahashi's claim is supported by many scholars. For instance, Nakamura Yūjirō writes, “One had to wait for Nishida for a work that could disprove [Nakae] Chōmin's judgment that there was no philosophy in Japan... Nishida's work is the first to deserve the name of philosophy.”⁴ In his work *One Year and a Half*, Nakae Chōmin (1847–1901) asserts that “from the past to present there has been no philosophy (*tetsugaku*) in Japan.”⁵ He continues, “People without philosophy do all things without a deep thought; they cannot avoid being superficial.”⁶ Nakae suggests that it is important to study philosophy in future, but he is doubtful in the rapid import of philosophy from the West. Blocker and Starling suggest a reason why philosophy was studied in Japan: “Japan felt it needed in order to compete with the West and avoid being colonized by the aggressive Western powers.”⁷ In other words, doing philosophy was a political signal to the rest of Asia—Japanese is leaving Asia and entering the West. As a result, *tetsugaku* is not conceived as a mere copy of the Western philosophical tradition, but a project to overcome the West. In other words, Japanese tried to learn philosophy not because of the will to become part of the West, but they thought they were capa-

2. See, for example, Hurst 1990.

3. Takahashi 1973, 153–182.

4. Quoted in Blocker & Starling 2001, 2.

5. Nakae 1983, 155.

6. Nakae 1983, 155.

7. Blocker and Starling 2001, 3.

ble of overcoming the West. This is the twofold-structure of Japanese philosophy. On one hand, Japanese philosophy is presumed as a part of the project of Westernisation. Some Japanese believe that *tetsugaku* should be distinguished from Confucian studies and Buddhist studies, since philosophy is exclusively a Western import for the sake of enlightening Japan.⁸ “Japanese philosophy” does not exist, for they see “philosophy” merely as a product from the West and hence the term “Japanese philosophy” becomes self-contradictory. On the other hand, Japanese philosophy is conceived as an “original” philosophical tradition since Meiji Restoration with the ultimate task to overcome the predominant Western culture. In this sense, “Japanese philosophy” exists: it is not merely a sub-division of Western philosophy, but a philosophy that is capable of overcoming the problems in the West.

It is true that Nishida is different from his predecessors who either imported or refused Western philosophy; he is also different from most of his successors who only study philosophical doctrines but show little originality in their works. Nishida is a philosopher who shows true insights on various philosophical problems and philosophises his own philosophical problem. Nevertheless, I shall argue that it is meaningless to label Nishida as the “first” Japanese philosopher. Even though the word *tetsugaku* was a recent product in late 19th century, it does not make sense to assert that there were no philosophical thoughts (a broad sense of philosophy) in the history of Japan before Meiji era. For example, Buddhism and Confucianism in Japan should be considered as a part of Japanese philosophy. In this sense, Zen master Dōgen (1200–1253), Confucian thinker Ogyū Sorai (1666–1728) as well as other Japanese thinkers deserve to be called Japanese philosophers. Indeed, Nishida is well aware that it is not only one philosophy but many philosophies. For Nishida, there are many sources of philosophies from different traditions in the world. In “New Year’s Lecture to the Emperor” (1941), Nishida writes,

8. In fact, the research on Japanese philosophy in Japan has long been a marginal subject. As a matter of fact, the only department of Japanese philosophy has established since 1995 in Kyoto University.

If I may describe Greek philosophy as a philosophy of *the polis*, centering in the city life of the Greeks, medieval philosophy was a religious philosophy, centering in the European Christian life, and recent philosophy is a scientific philosophy, centering in the recent scientific culture. Turning to the East, systems such as Confucianism, which is based on the teachings of Confucius and Mencius, and the thought of the “one hundred philosophers” have been considered philosophy. In my humble opinion, Buddhist doctrines especially contain a deep philosophical truth that is at least on a par with, if not superior to, the achievements of Western philosophy. These Oriental philosophical traditions have greatly influenced Japanese thought. The difference, however, is that in the East, philosophy did not fully develop itself as a specialized learned discipline in the same way as it did in the West. I believe that we need to put our effort [into establishing philosophy as a distinct discipline]. (NKZ 12: 267–68)⁹

We might not agree with Nishida, who argues that Buddhism is more superior to the philosophical tradition in the West. However, Nishida is right to point out that there are not only one but many philosophical traditions (Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Shintoism, etc) in Japan. Although it is true that many Japanese monks (Saijō, Kūkai, Dōgen, etc.) visited China to learn Buddhism, Buddhism was not the only philosophical tradition in Japan. Thomas Kasulis suggests a reason why Japanese philosophy is usually linked up with Buddhism. He writes, “partly through the influence from Hawaii, the U.S. flagship in the study of east-west philosophy, Japanese philosophy was originally classified as a subset of Buddhist philosophy. Such a categorization ignores all the philosophy in Japan that is not-Buddhist: Confucian, Neo-Confucian, Shinto (such as *kokugaku*), and the secular academic philosophy of the modern period.”¹⁰ Nishida is not a Buddhist philosopher. For Nishida, Japanese philosophy without the resources from the other philosophical traditions is fictional.

Nishida’s view of philosophy is in resonance with his view on cul-

9. Yusa 2002, 314–315.

10. Kasulis, “Japanese Philosophy in the English-Speaking World,” in Heisig 2004, 74.

ture. For Nishida, the task of Japanese culture is not to “Japanise” Japan, but to explore the potential of Japanese culture from a global perspective. In the same sense, Nishida has no interest to “Japanise” philosophy, but to re-think on the potential of Japanese philosophy in universal language. As is noticed by Abe Masao, Nishida synthesises “on the basis of historical life innate in human existence, which is neither Eastern nor Western, he neither established a new Eastern philosophy nor reconstructed Western philosophy, but created a new world philosophy.”¹¹ In other words, Nishida is a Japanese philosopher, but he has no intention to build a particular Japanistic philosophy; rather, he tries to develop a philosophy with universality. For this reason, it is important to interpret Nishida’s philosophy with an open dimension. In other words, one should neither reduce Japanese philosophy as a Westernised philosophy, nor to overemphasise it as a Japanised philosophy. Rather, Japanese philosophy is a project to find a third position: beyond East and West. Japanese philosophy is in a process of making. As John Maraldo argues, “Rather than strictly delimiting philosophy, we can acknowledge its historical conditions and the context of our own interests today to develop philosophy and allow it to continually re-define itself, as indeed Greek-European philosophy always has. Philosophy is forever in the making.”¹² Philosophy should not be conceived as an end-product, but an on-going project.

3. Teaching Japanese philosophy

Some 40 students registered in my course on Japanese philosophy, reaching its maximum capacity. I was surprised by the fact that so many students were interested in Japanese philosophy. So during the very first lecture, I asked my students why they took this course. At that time, I expected answers from three different groups of students. The first group is the Pro-Japanese (哈日派). They study Japanese philosophy because they are interested in Japanese culture, and they wish

11. Abe Masao, “Buddhism in Japan,” in Carr 1997, 787.

12. John Maraldo, “Defining Philosophy in the Making,” in Heisig 2004, 242–243.

to understand Japan better by studying Japanese philosophy. The second group is the Anti-Japanese (反日派). They have negative feelings toward Japan, and they study Japanese philosophy in order to know better their enemy. As Sunzi suggests in *The Art of War*, “If you know your enemies and know yourself, you can win a hundred battles without a single loss” (知彼知己, 百戰百勝). The third group of students are indifferent to Japanese culture; it was purely by accident that they are on the class list of my course. From the reactions of my students, I guessed that most of the students were from the first group. In fact, many young people in Hong Kong are interested in Japanese culture, though mainly on popular culture such as comics and animation.

To show my student a more serious approach to Japanese philosophy and culture, I mentioned the case of Tang Junyi (唐君毅, 1909–1978). Many scholars recognize Tang as one of the most important figures of New Confucianism (新儒家), but few of them mention the connection between Tang and Japan. During the Sino-Japanese war (1937–1945), Tang’s house at Chongqing (重慶) was bombed by Japanese war-plane, and he lost most of his personal belongings (including two manuscripts). In 1949, he escaped to Hong Kong and established the Department of Philosophy and Education of New Asia College. Later, he travelled to Japan several times for conferences and transits. From December 1966 to August 1967, he stayed in Kyoto for an operation on his retina detachment. In an article titled “Ritual life in the East and its meaning to the world—From a hospital in Kyoto to the ritual cultural life of daily life in the East, and my expectation on Japan and the world,” he recalls his memory of living in Japan after redrawn from Kyoto University Hospital. Tang writes,

For five years I have suffered from eye disease, and received medication at US, Philippines, Hong Kong and Japan... but after staying in a hospital in Kyoto for three months and living in Kyoto for another four months, I cannot forget the experience of meeting ordinary people in Kyoto. It makes me understand more about Japanese life, which recalls my memory in mainland China when I was young... Japanese from the lower class respect their jobs and are content with their jobs. Japanese taxi drivers and waiters do not ask for tips. It shows the men-

tality of self-satisfaction. These trivial matters recall my memory of the sentiment and virtue of traditional Chinese life. It is not found any more in Europe, US, or even in Hong Kong where I live... What impressed me most on my 8-month stay in Japan was that feeling that I was never regarded as a foreigner. Although I can hardly speak Japanese, we greet, smile or communicate with body gesture... On this living Japanese daily social-cultural life, I think it is exactly the ordinary ritual life in traditional China. However, this kind of ritual life is under severe criticism in modern time.¹³

According to Tang, ritual life is not any kind of formalism. Being polite to the other is not an “ought” based on any moral law, but a moral feeling from one’s heart. Ritual life is shared by cultures in East Asia, where the traditional way of life is facing challenges in the process of modernization (or in most cases, Westernization). Tang reckons that Japan preserved most of the tradition, while China failed to keep the culture. He believes Japan is the luckiest country in the world, because modern Japan managed to preserve most of her traditional culture. From this very fact, Tang suggests that Japan is a perfect example of “conservatism (保守論).” In short, he argues that the project of modernization can only be achieved through the preservation of traditional culture. Other confirming instances of conservatism are Jewish culture and British culture. According to Tang, people from these cultures are relatively conservative, but tradition is clearly not an obstacle to progress.

In my opinion, Tang’s experience in Japan brings him a “Japanese dream” (東瀛夢). In this dream, Tang would hope to see Japan becoming one of the leading countries to preserve Eastern traditional culture. Tang did notice Japan’s error in justifying her leadership in the making of “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere” (大東亞共榮圈). However, he reckons that it was only a result of colonialism / militarism imported from the West. Tang wishes that all human being (no matter of her/his nationality, social-cultural background, religion) can live a ritual life, which is nearest to human nature. Although Tang is a well-known

13. Tang 1988, 202–204.

admirer of Chinese culture, he does not follow a narrow nationalistic approach. Japanese can live a Chinese life, and vice versa. Tang shows that China and Japan have a common cultural-historical background. Facing similar problem (and fate) in the path of modernization, the two countries have much to share. Of course, this was only Tang's personal dream. He did not provide a concrete agenda. However, we can feel Tang's open-minded attitude and sincerity from his writings about Japan. Tang emphasised the importance of inter-cultural exchanges between China and Japan. True exchanges are not found in fact-finding academic dialogues, but in the true friendship between people with different cultural backgrounds.

4. A lesson from a student of Japanese philosophy

My experience of teaching Japanese philosophy is an unforgettable one. Teaching was far more difficult than I anticipated, for the course content covered too many topics, and there were clearly not enough primary and secondary texts for the purpose of teaching. Perhaps the real problem is not in the course design, but in my failure to deliver the lectures in a well-organised way. After reading my students' feedbacks, I confessed that I should have focused on lesser topics, and stated clearer the purpose of the course. I also received an "advice" from a student, who suggests an ultimate way to improve the attendance of the lecture: replacing the final term paper by an examination, so that students will pay more attention in the class! I was a former student of the Department of Philosophy, so I understand very well the huge pressure of writing a philosophical paper. However, I believe there is no better way to develop philosophical thinking rather than writing an academic paper. Indeed, I received many well-written papers with excellent argumentation and critical thinking.

Among all these papers, there is one paper that caught my eyes. Hereafter, I shall name the author of this paper Rita. The title of her paper is as follows: "From what I learnt from this course and Tang Junyi's understanding of Japan's invasion—evaluating the possibility of

removing the hatred of Chinese towards Japanese.”¹⁴ My first impression is that it does not sound like a usual academic paper, but I can feel the seriousness in between the words. The first paragraph reads,

Japan: a name that hurts my eyes. I remember in the first lecture, the teacher asked what kind of attitude we have in enrolling this course. He mentioned my case. I did come here with feeling of hatred towards Japan. But I did not raise my hand, because it was just the first lecture... Classmates were excited and happy when they mentioned about Japan... but I thought myself: For the students today, what is the meaning of the sorrowful history that China was demolished by Japan's invasion? What is the position of history in their heart?

It recalled my memory of the first lecture. Now I know that there is at least one student who is from the second group. She took this course as she really wanted to know more about her enemy. However, this is not the end of the story. She continues,

For me, it is extremely meaningful to be enrolled in this course. It is a matter of whether I can save my soul. As the proverb says, “You must know your enemy before you can defeat them.” Without doubt, I took this course for I would like to know more about Japan... However, what I really want to do—a wishful thinking perhaps – is to look for a cure from this course to remove my hatred towards Japan. My heart was never at peace since the day I knew the history of Japan's invasion. Due to this hatred toward Japan, we will never have a healthy mental development... This is pathological.

How could a lecture on Japanese philosophy save one's soul? It is extremely difficult to provide a cure for someone who has so much hatred toward something. However, Rita suggests she was able to find a cure in the teaching of Tang Junyi. She writes,

14. The original title in Chinese is “以課堂所學及唐君毅對日本侵華之理解——評估中國人釋除對日本仇恨的可能。” The English translation is mine.

I was surprised and shocked by Tang's understanding, tolerance and forgiving of Japan's invasion. It is the first time I read and analysed Japan's invasion history from another perspective. I understand our way of thinking are limited, and can be easily biased. This bias could be deepened when time flies; it would be more difficult to know objectively the history of Japan's invasion.

I was pleased to read these lines, "My hatred toward Japan may not be cured within a short period of time, but I would like to learn from Tang who tried to reach the goal of cultural harmony and world peace, and to face Japan today." Rita's paper does not provide us a clear conclusion, but she quotes Tang,

Old Chinese says: "The most important mutual understanding is the sharing of hearts." [人之相知，貴在知心] It is the same for the mutual understanding between races. Thus all academic-cultural exchanges in the world should aim at the goal of knowing "the heart of other race"... We can aim at the mutual understanding of the so-called "Chinese heart" or "Japanese heart" and form a Chinese-Japanese cultural exchange.¹⁵

Rita finishes her paper with a perfect finale, "Tang's words tell the truth. I quote his meaningful passage here to remind our heart."

5. Some remarks

In this essay, I have tried to summarise how I taught Japanese philosophy, and what lesson I was taught from my students. Japanese philosophy is not merely a lesson on the philosophical thoughts of Japanese thinkers, but it can also be a cure of wounds in one's heart. In the coming years, I might have other chances to teach Japanese philosophy again. Hopefully, I will be equipped with better teaching resources such as sourcebook and encyclopaedia, as well as a richer col-

15. Tang 1988, 389–390.

lection of translations of important works in Japanese philosophy. It would be easier for me to provide more facts about Japan culture, as well as more information on Japanese philosophy.

Of course, I have learnt from my students that teaching is not the same as offering facts and information. However, we still have to face the reality that Japanese philosophy is not taught at all. Scholars from different parts of the world may have certain degree of interest in Japanese culture, but perhaps most of them are indifferent toward Japanese philosophy. Although Tang emphasises the importance of intercultural communication and understanding, one should not take for granted that Japanese philosophy is well recognised among scholars of philosophy. On the level of research, there are prestigious academic journals for Western, Chinese, Indian, Buddhist, African philosophies, but there is not a single academic journal for Japanese philosophy. In order to make Japanese philosophy as an academic discipline, it is important to seek for the possibilities of establishing an international journal and an international association. More importantly, it is vital to provide more teaching resources on Japanese philosophy.

In “A Retirement Speech of a Professor (1929),” Nishida writes, “As I look back on my life, I see that it has been quite a simple one. In the first half I sat facing the blackboard. In the second half I stood with the blackboard behind me. I only changed my position in relation to the blackboard. This, in a nutshell, is my biography!” (NKZ 12: 169) More importantly, this professor was a teacher surrounded by his students. Nishida might be able to learn a lesson from Rita, if she were of one his students.

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