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Book Review: *The Self in the West and East Asia: Being or Becoming*

The Self in the West and East Asia: Being or Becoming by Jin Li. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2024, 320 pages. $45.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9781509561360.

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I. Introduction

In an era when cultural misunderstandings are no longer just academic curiosities but potential sources of geopolitical friction, Jin Li's *The Self in the West and East Asia: Being or Becoming* (Polity 2024) arrives with timely ambition. Drawing on her decades of research in cultural psychology and education, Li offers a wide-ranging account of how the "self" is conceptualized and enacted in what she frames as Western versus East Asian cultural traditions. By tracing these differences to ancient philosophical origins and illustrating their impact on learning, family life, and professional conduct, Li seeks to illuminate what she considers deep-seated cultural contrasts—namely, the Western emphasis on a fixed, bounded self versus the East Asian commitment to a relational, processual self. As a follow-up to her earlier book, *Cultural Foundations of Learning* (2012), this work extends Li's signature thesis that cultures cultivate not only different pedagogies but fundamentally different self-models. With lucid prose and a wealth of empirical examples, she strives to make the case that these divergent self-conceptions help explain cross-cultural differences in everything from parenting styles to notions of autonomy, emotional expression,

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and moral accountability. The book is structured thematically across nine chapters, each examining how cultural models of the self manifest through philosophical, psychological, and educational lenses. Together, they contribute to Li's broader project of understanding how people come to see themselves and are seen by others as moral and social being.

II. Philosophical and Empirical Frameworks

The book opens with a comparative inquiry into philosophical traditions, tracing how divergent models of the self emerged in Western and East Asian thought. Based on classical sources, Li contrasts the Western conception of the self as fixed, bounded, and essential with an East Asian view that sees the self as particular, flexible, and morally malleable. In the Western lineage—beginning with Greek rationalism, crystallized in Cartesian dualism, and later reinforced by Christian moral individualism—the self is imagined as an autonomous, enduring entity possessing intrinsic rights and stable identity. "*Sein/being* is so fundamental a building block that I might as well call it the Western cultural DNA. And, like biological DNA, this cultural DNA may hold the key for me to try to fathom their world" (5). By contrast, Li presents the East Asian model, shaped by East Asian philosophical traditions, particularly Confucian thought and ritual practices. Here, "[h]umans are not conceptualized as beings each of whom occupies a fixed location in space, but 'becomings' with open-ended fields. . . . A human is a small part situated in a much larger web of social relationships. . . . Therefore, 'full humaneness' needs to be anchored in human relationality" (10). Rather than a metaphysical interior to be discovered, the East Asian self is cultivated through patterned interactions and situated responsiveness. Li weaves together philosophical exposition with cross-cultural linguistic analysis, showing how grammatical structures and moral vocabularies mirror these different self-understandings. The result is a robust conceptual contrast between what she terms the "being self" of the West and the "becoming self" of East Asia. This foundational framing sets the tone for the rest of the book and serves

as the springboard for Li's interdisciplinary analysis.

The next chapters delve into the empirical foundations supporting Li's typology of the self. Drawing on linguistic analysis, developmental psychology, and comparative studies in child-rearing, Li makes the case that culture-specific ways of thinking and talking about the self are deeply ingrained and reinforced through early socialization. Western languages, she argues, prioritize agentic expressions—such as first-person pronouns, internal state verbs, and causative constructions—thus normalizing a self that is internally defined and bounded. In contrast, East Asian languages, especially Mandarin, Korean, and Japanese, often employ relational markers, contextual references, and honorific structures that orient the self toward others and social roles. Li supplements this analysis with a wide array of developmental studies that track how children in different cultures acquire these language patterns and internalize corresponding values. For instance, East Asian parents are shown to emphasize moral vocabulary, group responsibility, and emotional restraint when guiding their children. American parents, by contrast, are more likely to highlight autonomy, individual preferences, and self-esteem. These patterns are not merely verbal—they are formative. Li illustrates this point through longitudinal research comparing the narratives children tell about themselves, their perceived obligations, and their response to success and failure. The evidence is particularly compelling in the chapters that focus on educational settings. Drawing on cross-national studies conducted in the U.S., China, Korea, and Japan, Li shows that East Asian children tend to see academic achievement as a reflection of moral effort and familial duty, while Western children often frame it in terms of individual success and self-realization. This divergence, Li argues, is not a matter of parenting style alone, but reflects deeper cultural models of what it means to be a person, a learner, and a moral subject.

III. Educational and Moral Implications

Li then shifts from descriptive analysis to the practical implications of these models in educational systems. Here, Li contrasts Western

pedagogical ideals—centered on critical thinking, creativity, and self-expression—with East Asian approaches that prioritize diligence, self-discipline, and deference to authority. While acknowledging the merits of both systems, Li advocates for greater recognition of East Asian educational values, which she sees as underappreciated in global discourse. In particular, "Confucians not only regard human moral potential as unlimited, but they also deem one's effortful self-cultivation as necessary to achieve moral excellence" (108). These values, she contends, foster not only academic rigor but also moral sensibilities such as humility, perseverance, and collective responsibility. Li articulates a broad cultural pattern in which education is deeply intertwined with moral formation. She emphasizes the Confucian concept of *xue* ("learning"). This shared moral vision, grounded in *xue*, underpins East Asian approaches to education and shapes the expectations of both students and educators. At the same time, Li is attentive to the limitations and challenges within East Asian systems—such as pressure, overwork, and the risk of conformity—but she tends to present these as correctable by-products rather than structural flaws. Her overall emphasis remains on what East Asian approaches can offer to global education, especially in fostering moral commitment and developmental adaptability.

Finally, the last chapters turn toward the contemporary moment, examining how globalization and cross-cultural exchanges are reshaping self-conceptions in both the West and East Asia. Li acknowledges that traditional models of selfhood are increasingly subject to hybridization, especially among younger generations who navigate multiple cultural codes in education, family, and professional life. Despite these shifts, she argues that the foundational models—the being self and the becoming self—retain surprising durability. Drawing on recent empirical studies and classroom observations, Li shows how hybrid selves often reflect not a full integration of cultural elements, but a negotiated balance shaped by context-specific values, expectations, and institutional demands. This section also revisits the philosophical tensions explored earlier in the book, raising questions about the extent to which moral education, parenting, and institutional design can or should draw on different traditions. While Li expresses

cautious optimism about the possibilities for mutual learning between cultural systems, she remains committed to the view that the relational, developmental orientation of the East Asian self provides crucial insights for a global age. Particularly in the wake of widespread disillusionment with Western individualism, she suggests that the East Asian emphasis on moral cultivation, interdependence, and adaptive selfhood may offer an alternative path forward.

IV. The Risks of Cultural Binarism

The book aims to serve as both a synthesis of research and a pedagogical resource, appealing to educators, psychologists, and scholars of culture alike. Philosophers—particularly those interested in moral psychology, theories of the self, or comparative philosophy—will also find much of interest here. Drawing on a wide array of philosophical sources, from Aristotle and Descartes to Zhuangzi and Zhu Xi, the book at times reads almost like a concise intellectual history of selfhood across civilizations. While its central typology is broad and open to critique, its interdisciplinary method provides a compelling entry point into enduring questions about human development, moral formation, and cultural meaning-making.

That said, the same features that make the book so accessible and pedagogically effective also raise important critical questions. One of the most thought-provoking yet contentious aspects of *The Self in the West and East Asia* is its reliance on a binary model of selfhood. While Li is careful to cite a broad range of psychological and philosophical sources, her central typology risks essentializing complex cultural and historical developments into two sharply opposed categories. Despite her acknowledgement of internal variations and the fluidity of cultural boundaries, the narrative arc of the book often returns to a familiar trope: the Western self as isolated, abstract, and analytical; and the East Asian self as contextual, flexible, and relational.

This dichotomy is not merely descriptive but affects the interpretative frame through which socio-ethical norms are assessed. The valorization of East Asian relationality tends to sideline or obscure

the lived realities of those who may be constrained or burdened by precisely those relational expectations. Indeed, to suggest that East Asian selfhood is fundamentally more attuned to human connection may inadvertently reproduce the same epistemic occlusions that feminist scholars have long critiqued. What becomes invisible when cultures are defined primarily through their purported relational virtues? By sketching "beings" and "becomings" primarily as ideals, Li risks eliding the very real, non-ideal contexts in which selves live—a point we will return to in considering educational dramas like teacher burnout.

Li's account highlights the moral benefits of a becoming-oriented, relational self, especially in its openness to change, learning, and moral cultivation. However, what the book does not fully confront is how such relational ethics can become structurally entangled with moral coercion. The line between moral attunement and imposed obligation is thin, particularly in familial or hierarchical settings. Concepts like trust, moral warmth, and shared duty—so often celebrated in East Asian traditions and contemporary Confucian discourse—can also function as tools of suppression when they operate without adequate attention to individual autonomy or power asymmetries.

V. Moral Warmth and Its Discontents

For example, the filial piety model Li references (with care, yet still affirmatively) is never placed under sustained scrutiny for its potential to normalize disproportionate sacrifice or silence dissent within families. Similarly, her anecdotal descriptions of teachers going beyond institutional boundaries to help students, or family and friends assuming moral responsibility for each other's financial risks, are presented as admirable without fully engaging the burdens they may impose, or who is expected to bear them. The book's silence on these structural risks may indicate a blind spot. When moral warmth is decontextualized from its institutional or cultural manifestations of inequality, it can easily drift into dangerous romanticization. In this vein, Li contrasts East Asian emotional warmth and mutual

trust with the more impersonal, rule-based frameworks of the West. This characterization may inadvertently misrepresent what such impersonal systems are designed to accomplish. The Western emphasis on professional boundaries, legal formalism, and psychological individuation is not simply a cultural quirk but often a response to historical abuses of power, whether in the form of clerical misconduct, educational overreach, or familial neglect.

In fact, the very systems Li seems to view as overly impartial and detached—such as the reluctance of teachers in the U.S. to provide rides home to students or to touch them in supportive ways—are the result of rigorous protections against sexual abuse, labor exploitation, and liability risks. To frame these as symptoms of Western emotional impoverishment is to overlook their protective intent and the historical contexts that necessitated them. By contrast, the examples Li celebrates as indicative of East Asian moral self—borrowing large sums of money from friends without legal contracts, or teachers taking on emotional labor outside their job descriptions—could also be read as instances of emotional overextension or systemic failure. In South Korea, for example, recent reports of overburdened teachers and burnout-related deaths have led to public outcry precisely because such "warmth" was expected to substitute for institutional protections. This paradox of moral warmth—where relational closeness sometimes masks coercion—deserves greater attention. The very traits valorized in one culture frame may turn out to be the sources of moral, psychological, and even physical harm in another, particularly when the relational self is made to bear the full weight of communal responsibility.

Throughout the book, Li maintains a descriptive tone, framing her project as a comparative exploration rather than a prescriptive treatise. Nevertheless, there are moments when the narrative slips into normative territory. The East Asian self is repeatedly praised for its adaptive qualities, its developmental openness, and its embedded moral orientation—qualities that are gently but unmistakably positioned as morally superior to the more "self-centered, fixed" Western model. This tacit normativity can be subtle yet potent. While never explicitly stating that the East Asian self is preferable, the cumulative rhetoric of the book implies as much. In particular in later chapters,

the reiteration of East Asia's philosophical sophistication and emotional maturity may begin to read less like an analysis and more like a cultural endorsement. Readers are left with the impression that Western individualism may be intellectually coherent but emotionally and morally lacking, as many contemporary Confucian scholars insist. For the book to function as a truly cross-cultural inquiry, it must more directly engage with the risks and limitations of the cultural ideals it seeks to affirm. Only then can the study of the self move beyond typology toward a more pluralistic ethics of becoming.

VI. Conclusion

Despite these concerns, *The Self in the West and East Asia* offers a significant contribution to ongoing conversations about cultural psychology and moral education. It is likely to stimulate further inquiry, not only among psychologists and educators, but also philosophers interested in how conceptions of self are entangled with ethics, authority, and social life. As global cultural encounters grow more ethically fraught, Li compels us to scrutinize not only how others live and think, but also the normative assumptions that underlie our own self-conceptions. Yet the true test of any theory of self lies in its purchase in messy, non-ideal realities. Future debates must therefore consider the institutional safeguards, policy frameworks, and everyday practices needed to ensure that these inspiring self-models uplift rather than overburden real lives and to guard against the coercive shadows of moral warmth. In doing so, the book invites deeper reflection on what kind of self we are cultivating—and for whose sake.