
Scholar's Corner: Confucianism in and for the Modern World

Research on “East Asian Philosophy” in Japanese Academia

Minseok Kwak*

The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief overview of research trends concerning “East Asian philosophy” in Japanese academia and to consider their significance. Before proceeding, however, it is worth noting that “East Asian philosophy” has yet to become an established concept in Japanese academia. If someone were to introduce their field of research as “East Asian philosophy,” it would be difficult for others to form a concrete idea of what that person actually studies. This situation appears to stem from a tendency in Japan to draw a relatively strict distinction between the concepts of “thought” (*shisō*) and “philosophy” (*tetsugaku*). Taking the modern period—when philosophy was actively adopted as a modern academic discipline—as the dividing line, forms of knowledge predating modernity are generally called “thought,” whereas those emerging thereafter are called “philosophy.” According to this distinction, “East Asian thought” refers to traditional East Asian systems of knowledge such as Confucianism and Buddhism. By contrast, there is no broadly shared consensus as to what kinds of intellectual production “East Asian philosophy” denotes or what characteristics such production possesses.

A useful contrast to the situation of “East Asian philosophy” in Japanese academia is provided by the concept of “Japanese philosophy.” In Japanese academia, “Japanese philosophy” is a fairly well-established category and is strongly associated with the Kyoto School. This is because there is a broadly shared understanding that, in the modern period, the Kyoto School sought to develop a distinctively Japanese

* Minseok Kwak is an Associate Professor at the Graduate School of Human and Environmental Studies, Kyoto University. E-mail: kwakmskj@gmail.com

philosophy through rigorous modes of thinking comparable to those of Western philosophy and thereby formed a major current of modern Japanese thought. Recently, of course, increasing attention has also been paid to diverse forms of “Japanese philosophy” outside the Kyoto School.¹ By contrast, neither the philosophical currents that might be said to represent modern East Asia nor the precise boundaries of such currents have received sufficient examination. Thus, at least within the context of Japanese academia, asking about “East Asian philosophy” does not mean investigating an already clearly defined object. Rather, it means asking what “East Asian philosophy” is and undertaking the work of constructing it anew. This task may be described as an effort to relativize the dichotomy between “thought” and “philosophy” and to explore new forms of knowledge by treating “East Asia” as a methodological framework.²

This paper focuses on the development in Japan of “East Asian philosophy” as a method for exploring new forms of knowledge and introduces its current state. With regard to research trends on Zhu Xi studies, which are often regarded as representative of so-called “East Asian thought” in the premodern period, an excellent English-language article is already available: Tsuyoshi Kojima’s “Methods Employed in Research on the Chu Hsi School: Research Trends in Japan since the 1970s” (Kojima 2017). The present paper therefore limits its focus to

¹ Masakatsu Fujita (2018) is especially significant as an attempt to present a general history of Japanese philosophy without restricting it to any particular philosophical school. Nevertheless, the scope of “philosophy” in this book is limited to modern Japanese philosophy: its narrative begins with Nishi Amane (1829–1897), who translated the English term *philosophy* as *tetsugaku*. This limitation reflects the dichotomy between “thought” and “philosophy.” A noteworthy general history of Japanese thought from ancient times to the present is Fumihiko Sueki (2020). In the afterword, Sueki notes that several substantial English-language volumes on “Japanese Philosophy,” including classical thought, have recently been published and that these developments must also be taken into account (p. 251). This observation is highly important not only for reconsidering the history of Japanese thought but also for reworking the concept of “philosophy” itself.

² Takahiro Nakajima (2022) is a groundbreaking attempt to investigate Chinese philosophy from antiquity to the present under the concept of “philosophy.” Its rich implications for comparative philosophy and its inquiry into philosophy as a universal endeavor are also highly suggestive for the construction of “East Asian philosophy.”

intellectual projects that employ “East Asian philosophy” as a method.

As noted above, the concept of “East Asian philosophy” itself has yet to become firmly established in Japanese academia. Tomomi Asakura’s *Is There No Philosophy in East Asia? The Kyoto School and New Confucianism* (Asakura 2014) raises the fundamental question of whether such a thing as “East Asian philosophy” exists at all. Based on the view that “philosophy” is a product of the modern period that emerged under the stimulus of Western philosophy, the book examines two influential intellectual currents in East Asia—the Kyoto School and modern New Confucianism—both of which took shape as responses to Western philosophy. From his own standpoint of “Tiantai Perfect Teaching,” Asakura seeks to derive the fundamental characteristics of “East Asian philosophy” through close textual analysis. The book deserves attention as a recent study that directly investigates both the existence and the fundamental characteristics of “East Asian philosophy.”

Efforts to comprehensively investigate the various forms of philosophy found across East Asia, with particular attention to the intellectual transformations that occurred from the modern period onward, have existed since the early 2000s. *East Asia and Philosophy* (Fujita, Bian, and Kōsaka 2003), the product of a collaborative project involving scholars from Japan, China, and Korea and led by Masakatsu Fujita of Kyoto University, was an important early achievement in this field. A subsequent international collaborative volume, *Dialogue among Traditions of Thought: The Reception and Development of Philosophy in East Asia* (Fujita 2015), moved beyond the parallel study of philosophical activities in the different regions of East Asia and explicitly proposed “dialogue” among traditions of thought as a methodological standpoint. This approach does not merely understand “East Asian philosophy” as a set of phenomena that arose in the geographical region of East Asia; by seeking new intellectual possibilities through such “dialogue,” it also provided an important direction for further refining the concept of “East Asian philosophy.”

The recently published *The Formation and Development of Philosophy in East Asia: From an Intercultural Perspective* (Liao et al. 2022) is the product of a collaborative project involving scholars from Japan,

China, Taiwan, Korea, and Vietnam and is a substantial collection containing essays by thirty-nine contributors. In addition to promoting international collaborative research on East Asian philosophy, the volume is significant for its self-conscious exploration of how East Asian endeavors might contribute to “world philosophy.” It does so by focusing on the processes through which thinkers created philosophies of their own while passing through the historical turning point of modernity. This problem is closely connected to the task of refining the concept of “East Asian philosophy,” and further developments toward its renewed construction are to be expected. The collaborative project is still ongoing, and an even larger collection of essays than the previous volume is scheduled for publication in the second half of 2026.

Although research on East Asia’s philosophical heritage has increased in both quantity and quality, primarily through international collaboration, this does not mean that the answer to the question “What is East Asian philosophy?” has become any clearer. Nevertheless, I believe that what matters is precisely the continued interrogation of an “East Asian philosophy” that remains indefinitely indeterminate. Now that East Asia’s philosophical heritage is being connected to the broader concept of “world philosophy,” continuing to ask what “East Asian philosophy” is may offer an important opportunity to overcome the deeply rooted dichotomy between “thought” and “philosophy” and to bring about a new transformation in our understanding of philosophy as a universal human endeavor. With these expectations for the exploration of “East Asian philosophy” in Japan, this paper concludes.

REFERENCES

- Asakura, Tomomi. 2014. “*Higashi Ajia ni tetsugaku wa nai*” no ka: *Kyōto gakuha to Shin Juka* (Is There No Philosophy in East Asia? The Kyoto School and New Confucianism). Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.
- Fujita, Masakatsu, Chong-dao Bian, and Shirō Kōsaka, eds. 2003. *Higashi Ajia to tetsugaku* (East Asia and Philosophy). Kyoto: Nakanishiya Shuppan.
- Fujita, Masakatsu, ed. 2015. *Shisōkan no taiwa: Higashi Ajia ni okeru tetsugaku no juyō to tenkai* (Dialogue among Traditions of Thought: The Reception and Development of Philosophy in East Asia). Tokyo: Hōsei University Press.
- Fujita, Masakatsu. 2018. *Nihon tetsugakushi* (A History of Japanese Philosophy). Kyoto: Shōwadō.
- Kojima, Tsuyoshi. 2017. “Methods Employed in Research on the Chu Hsi School: Research Trends in Japan since the 1970s.” *Acta Asiatica: Bulletin of the Institute of Eastern Culture* 112: 31–46.
- Liao, Qinbin, Takayuki Itō, Kazuki Kawai, and Shō Yamamura, eds. 2022. *Higashi Ajia ni okeru tetsugaku no seisei to hatten: Ibunka no shiten kara* (The Formation and Development of Philosophy in East Asia: From an Intercultural Perspective). Tokyo: Hōsei University Press.
- Nakajima, Takahiro. 2022. *Chūgoku tetsugakushi: Shoshi hyakka kara Shushigaku, gendai no shin Juka made* (A History of Chinese Philosophy: From the Hundred Schools of Thought to Zhu Xi Studies and Modern New Confucianism). Tokyo: Chūō Kōron Shinsha.
- Sueki, Fumihiko. 2020. *Nihon shisōshi* (A History of Japanese Thought). Tokyo: Iwanami Bunko.

* About “Scholar’s Corner”:

Scholar’s Corner is a dedicated section that explores the multifaceted dimensions of Confucianism in modern society. Since its launch in 2019, it has featured thoughtfully curated contributions from renowned scholars and experts, offering in-depth analyses and unique perspectives on a wide range of Confucian themes.