

Introduction

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Spirituality plays a significant role in shaping the cohesion of communities, their values, and their structures across the globe. Various religious practices and ideational systems are particularly complex in Asia. Home to some of the world major spiritual traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism, as well as to a relevant number of practicing Christians, Muslims, and self-identified atheists and agnostics, Asia provides us with an intense and extraordinarily rich tapestry of different religious and spiritual practices.

Because of their importance, these traditions and practices form the common thread behind the special theme of the present issue of the journal *Asian Studies*. The volume challenges the notion that Asian modernities are derivative imitations of the West. On the contrary, it argues that contemporary Asian societies have transformed their ancient traditions in unique ways, forming new distinctive and widespread spiritual and religious practices that are of utmost importance for the representation, preservation, and revival of traditions, as well as for forming the identity of modern peoples living in contemporary Asian societies.

The volume is structured into five sections, including articles on *The Concept of Time in Buddhism*, contributions devoted to the issues of *Mind and Body*, *Subject and Object* in Asian religions, debates on the *Some Characteristics of Japanese and Korean Buddhism*, introductions to *Contemporary Neo-Confucianism*, as well as discussions of *Narrations and Religious Histories*. In the first section, Bart Dessein and Jianyun Li explore some important connections between different Buddhist meditation techniques and the perception and sensation of time. To different degrees they all also touch on the problematic, but highly topical relation between the Buddhist and the cognitive studies. Bart Dessein, approaches the problems of time in Buddhism through a historical perspective. In his article “Progress and Free Will: On the Buddhist Concept of ‘Time’ and Its Possibilities for Modernity” he mainly explores the notion of time through the ideas of progress and free will, which are also important concepts included in Buddhism, especially in the Mahayana School. Jianyun Li’s contribution entitled “What is Time? Yogācāra-Buddhist Meditation

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on the Problem of the External World in the *Cheng Weishi Lun*” is also mainly focused upon the Buddhist concept of time and its relation to human perception and cognition. Both contributions contained in the first section, inter alia, at least briefly deal with the relation between Buddhism and modern cognitive studies. This relation is also a central topic of the second section entitled *Body and Mind, Subject and Object*. This section opens with Sebastjan Vörös’s essay, which directly addresses this relation and points out some central questions related to the topic through the lens of the study of consciousness in cognitive neuroscience. Andrej Ule’s contribution develops some further approaches to these questions through the Buddhist insight into forms of consciousness, which enable humans to become aware of the elimination of all differences between the individual (personal) self and the universal Self, transcending even the very category of existence and not-existence. The author of the last article in this section is Hashi Hisaki. Her contribution deals with contemporary Zen Buddhism and focuses on some spiritual possibilities it offers to post-modern, alienated human beings. It describes the opportunities to seize and preserve in these digital era the original human consciousness with its creative thinking and acting, including its abilities to transmit one idea to another for reforming and developing something new.

Iva Lakić Parać and Beatrix Mecsí are the authors of the third section, which explores “Some Characteristics of Japanese and Korean Buddhism”. While Parać’s essay opens the question of whether and to what extent the popular image of Bodhisattva Jizō in Japan still contains certain elements of native or autochthonous Japanese religions, Mecsí’s article deals with different forms of the popularization of Bodhidharma in Korea and Japan respectively through the lens of intercultural comparisons.

The next section deals with the philosophical and spiritual stream of Contemporary or Modern (Neo)-Confucian thought. While Jana S. Rošker explores this stream through its relation to the concept of the so-called “Asian Values”, Haesung Lee introduces to the readers one of the most important Confucian discourses in the history of Korean philosophy, namely the Neo-Confucianism of the Joseon dynasty.

The last section of this special issue is of a more general nature. It includes three articles on various topics concerning religious histories and religious narrations. While Tamara Ditrich explores the history of the modern concept of mindfulness and its recent post-colonial roots, Tahereh Ahmadipour introduces us a new interpretation of certain spiritual dimensions that can be found in Vladimir Bartol’s novel *Alamut*. The special issue concludes with Nataša Visočnik’s essay on the spiritual life and the role of religion in the life of *Zainichi* Koreans in contemporary Japan.

Thus, as we could see above, the present volume contains an extraordinarily rich range of materials on a relatively wide variety of topics, linked to Asian spiritual and religious traditions and their role in modern times. All of them indicate the continuing vitality of these traditions. Because of the key role Asian spirituality plays in holding together communities, explaining ancient traditions, and celebrating nature and life, we hope that this issue will be of interest for many readers of our journal. We also hope it will represent a small, but significant step in the nowadays much-needed examination of the relation between the spiritual and the secular in Asian societies and that it will, in a broader and more general sense, raise a deeper awareness about the importance of comparative studies of religion and society.

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