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*Cross-Cultural Existentialism: On the Meaning of Life
in Asian and Western Thought*

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A Review of *Cross-Cultural Existentialism:
On the Meaning of Life
in Asian and Western Thought*

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Cross-Cultural Existentialism: On the Meaning of Life in Asian and Western Thought. By Leah Kalmanson. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, 194 pp., ISBN 978-1-350-14001-1 (hardback), \$115.00.

Leah Kalmanson's book, *Cross-Cultural Existentialism: On the Meaning of Life in Asian and Western Thought*, addresses two problems I've often encountered in my teaching experience, head-on: students express feeling rudderless after taking my course on "religious existentialism." Moreover, the course is fixated upon one cultural period. They read Jean-Paul Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism* to engage with how the notion that "existence precedes essence" entails individual freedom by suspending ultimate claims and teleologies. But then Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of lived experience under the category "woman," in her introduction to *The Second Sex*, shows how thoroughly contingent social structures limit personal freedom. By the third week, students learn how Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* attacks Enlightenment conceptions of the "self" as a self-

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contained entity that objectively deploys reason in a world of traceable, linear cause-and-effect.

“Religion” appears at this point in the course, when considering how Nietzsche uses the term for a vitality-draining neurosis employed to serve social conformity. The course then pivots to Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, the conceptual framework of which presents an antithesis to nearly all of the above. The problems arrive when students realize how the Western existentialist canon expertly analyzes problems of subjective interiority, only to then leave off when they ask with unease, “well, then, now what?” and “how does this make sense in a globalized world?” Kalmanson’s book considers existentialism beyond its historically peculiar response to the crisis of modernity. Importantly, too, the book engages key themes, such as authenticity and freedom, without attempting to make connections to Asian texts through adaptations of post-Enlightenment philosophies of mysticism or apophasis. Its chapters draw upon Asian philosophical works to propose a cross-cultural “speculative existentialism” that promotes transvaluation—Nietzsche’s term for a relativizing, self-reflective process that creates individual ethical principles—and the realization of the ensuing principles through individual ritual practices, such as meditation.

The book does not read “Existentialism” back onto Asian texts. Kalmanson names such superimposition as a mistake (11). “Existentialism” names a small group of European philosophical texts, relative to their context, collected retrospectively in the twentieth century. In comparison, many texts that are taken as “Buddhist” come from a far wider historical and geographical span; their contents use terminology specific to topics and problems, which are directly related to figures and schools that adhere to Buddhist traditions. Each group of texts is idiosyncratic and asynchronous to the other. (Aside from Nietzsche’s largely polemical comments on the subject, there is no mention of Buddhism in existentialist texts.) Kalmanson sees this as an opportunity to speculate on how the problems of Cartesian subjectivity raised by existentialist texts may be

instructively amplified and redirected by East Asian philosophies. Her argument is that Existentialist efforts to undo the subject-object dualism of European philosophies since Kant are so closely focused on transforming subjective interiority that they offer no practical techniques to inform daily living (2). To develop this thesis, Kalmanson reads broadly across recent scholarship on Mahāyāna traditions—Chan, Won, Pure Land, and Zen—in order to rethink possibilities for a twenty-first century existentialist project. Readers can then see the two sources for the book: the Western existentialist canon and contemporary scholarship on Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Kalmanson's speculative project has a third strategy. She “adapt[s] the existentialist position to *qi*-philosophy and not the other way around” (96). The book draws upon philosophical scholarship on figures of the Song and Ming dynasties (e.g., Zhu Xi's readings of the *Book of Rites*), which Kalmanson identifies as “*qi*-based philosophy” (9), to provide an explanation for why and how Buddhist practices enable the transformative potential identified as absent in European existentialism. Her critique of the conventional existentialist canon is that “existential philosophy repeatedly sees the reemergence of the subject-object dualism and all of the attendant problems, because it lacks a clearly articulated plan of practice for enacting its own non-dualistic theoretical insights” (32). Despite existentialist attacks on naïve realism and objectivist conceptions of truth, existentialist texts tacitly sustain an inheritance of Judeo-Christian monotheism and Enlightenment teleologies, with a fixation on agency reasoning in a world filled with mute objects. That worldview produces nihilist anxieties, whose questions about subjective interiority ask for ultimate answers (thus my students' “now what?”). Kalmanson avoids these dilemmas by invoking the worldviews of texts, such as the *Book of Rites* (*Liji*) and the *Daodejing*. The intellectual histories of “*qi*-based worldviews” do not self-identify in terms corresponding to “existential” (96); however, Kalmanson intends that mismatch to produce a “highly speculative comparative exercise” (*ibid.*), where existentialist themes may be reframed

and amplified by considering human activity as situated within matter-energy matrices of a value-laden, yet dysteleological, universe.

Kalmanson usefully structures the text for readers unfamiliar with Buddhist and *qi*-based philosophies. The basic concepts are concisely explained with abundant references to contemporary scholarship in both Western and Asian philosophy, as well as current theoretical debates in religious studies. The book is brief at 142 pages of text (prior to notes, bibliography, and index), and clearly divisible into two halves. The first two chapters establish a scholarly horizon, whereas the final two chapters may be easily read by undergraduates in order to prepare for a broader consideration of existential questions about anxiety, alienation, authenticity, and freedom.

When used for this purpose, students may be directed to the third and fourth chapters, alongside the conclusion. Chapter three develops an explanation of *qi*—drawing on the commentaries of Zhu Xi and the *Guanzi*—as a recursively interactive element of reality that not only makes sense of Nietzsche’s conception of the “self” as a psychical multiplicity, but also relates this to the structural dynamism experienced by humans in their worlds. The upshot is to augment conventional existentialism, such that new values are partly created by the microcosmic agency of multiple human, as well as other dynamic and responsive macrocosmic, processes in the cosmos. Chapter four relates ideas of twentieth-century phenomenology and existentialism to contemporary scholarship on Ruism and religious studies (such as those of Michael Ing, Stephen C. Angle, Victor Hori, and Kevin Schilbrack). The aim is to consider the transformative import of ritual, rite, practice, and training. Kalmanson usefully pairs canonical existential themes of anxiety, alienation, authenticity, and freedom, with considerations of Ruist philosophical conceptions of solitude/*you*, stillness/*jing*, sincerity/*cheng*, and spontaneity/*ziran*. The fourth chapter clearly proposes “what’s next” according to Kalmanson: training practices informing *qi*-based philosophical texts may provide a robust

understanding of “existence preceding essence.” They are resources for human agency to enable its own freedom to realize value and meaning (124).

Where the latter half of the book is familiar to readers of Asian philosophy, the first chapter reviews topics and debates familiar to readers of Western existentialism. Kalmanson explains how the liberative aim of existentialism, to critically revise meaning-making amid a post-war Europe entering the nuclear age, is “stuck in a loop . . . staring down the borders of subjective experience, unable to see what lies beyond” (39). Chapter two offers a mix of the familiar and unfamiliar by examining the economy of karmic merit as a practicable mode of existential meaning-making. Kalmanson introduces readers to the syncretic “existential Buddhism” (52) of Korean Buddhist nun Kim Wonju (1896-1971; dharma name Iryōp). Iryōp’s biography and texts are presented as a synthesis of existentialism, Buddhism, and *qi*-philosophy. Kalmanson reads Iryōp’s texts as an example of autonomous value-creation, with references to Graham Parkes’s scholarship to connect Iryōp’s writings with Nietzsche’s cosmology and psychology: in an uncreated world that simply “is,” karmic causality is plural, relational, and omnipresent. Beings are free to realize and take advantage of these conditions. Kalmanson’s argument is that Iryōp’s meditative practices of “self-cultivation” (130) can provide pointers for existentialists as artist-creators, using meditation to change lived conditions through the “radical creativity of emptiness” (65). Existential Buddhism is presented as a philosophical orientation towards subjectivity, informed by Buddhist teachings on formlessness and emptiness, that makes use of *qi*-based daily practices to continually re-form and renew both the “self” and world.

Cross-Cultural Existentialism is a very accessible text that quite successfully creates connections amid a small collection of European philosophical texts, a much larger corpus of Asian texts from the Song Dynasty to twentieth-century Korea, and a body of scholarship on Mahāyāna Buddhism. While that may seem ambitious, Kalmanson diligently synthesizes her argument with surprising efficiency.