

## BOOK REVIEWS

# Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples India, China, Tibet, Japan

By Hajime Nakamura

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REVISED EDITION  
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XX + 712 PAGES

The reappearance of Nakamura-sensei's *Ways of Thinking* is like the return of a lover from whom we thought we had escaped by moving to a distant city. We are forced to confront unfinished business, to discuss whether there will be a reconciliation or a definitive separation. This "revised edition" is a photographic reprint of the 1964 English version, unchanged (except for the title page, from where the name of the translator has disappeared, although it is preserved in the small print of the cataloging data) down to the entertaining typographical error in the table of contents ("Universality of the Tao" is still "University of the Tao," page xix), totally unreconstructed, glaring at us across three decades. "I'm still here," it says. "Are you ever going to take me seriously?"

Some years ago I tried to do just that, by holding a seminar on *Ways of Thinking* for the Asian/Pacific Studies faculty of Duke University. My colleagues were taken aback by what they called my courage, implying that they were being polite about my foolhardiness. "Nobody talks of that now," I was told. Well, I thought that they should, and I considered that I was senior enough that if I talked about it my career could not be hurt, my discussion could at worst be brushed aside as the ramblings of an old fogey. What surprised me was that the amount of interest evinced in the subject matter was almost in direct proportion to the lack of ability to offer a critique of it. It seemed that we had become, in the words of my teacher, Richard Hugh Robinson, an academy of micromaniacs. We could no longer deal with Big Ideas. Or, to paraphrase the physicist Heinrich von Weizsäcker, we were experts at looking at the bricks but we could not see the cathedral. We yearned to be more, but we did not know how.

So much the worse for the experts. Undergraduates and high school students are likely to be more open to the book's argument, though they will need a competent teacher to guide them through it—the primary readership must clearly be specialists—for no matter how often we threaten our students with red ink in the margins of their papers, they persist in asserting that there is a difference between Eastern thinking and Western thinking. I believe that our students are ahead of us here. Their intuition tells them that humans do not all think alike, but they express this feeling in vague, over-broad generalizations. Instead of demolishing them, as anyone with an advanced degree in Asian

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Studies can do with the flick of a footnote, we should help them to be more precise, using this book.

Nakamura makes similar generalizations, but they are always backed up by extensive and unimpeachable scholarly references. They may be wrong, but they are not trivial, and they are not readily dismissed. Is Indian thinking trans-historical, its eyes focused on the Eternal, while Chinese thinking grubs in the dirt for precise historical data? Do Tibetans submit to the charismatic individual while Japanese submerge themselves in the family, broadly conceived? Nakamura provides a wealth of evidence for these apparently naive views. In so doing, he makes sense of remarks such as Shinran's "I do not know whether the *nembutsu* is actually the means of rebirth in the Pure Land, or whether perhaps it is the road to Hell. Even though I were cajoled by [my Master] Saint Hōnen that I should go to Hell through the *nembutsu*, I should do so and not regret it" (page 450).

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If the book has a fault, it is that, even at over 700 pages, it is too short. In 1964 we could ignore Korea, for Westerners knew scarcely anything about it and Japanese did not care to discuss it. In 1999 we know that Korea has produced major thinkers, and we would like to ponder their distinctiveness. We would also like to ruminate on the thinking of Southeast Asian peoples, and on what we used to call the "folk" but now variously call traditional or pre-Axial populations. *Ways of Thinking* "was the basis of conferences held at the East-West Center [in Honolulu], in 1962–1963" (page xi). We need another such series of conferences, perhaps even an ongoing colloquium, as we try to understand our planet's thinking as it moves into the second millennium of the Common Era. Our former lover is at the door. How do we respond? ■

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