

Brook Ziporyn's (Chinese) Buddhist Reading of Chinese Philosophy

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In this review article I will look at Brook Ziporyn's three most recent books, namely *Ironies of Oneness and Difference: Coherence in Early Chinese Thought*, *Beyond Oneness and Difference: Li and Coherence in Chinese Buddhist Thought and Its Antecedents*, and *Emptiness and Omnipresence: An Essential Introduction to Tiantai Buddhism*. (Below I will refer to these as *Ironies of Oneness*, *Beyond Oneness*, and *Emptiness and Omnipresence*). After briefly summarizing the major arguments in each text, I will offer a defence against the criticism that Ziporyn's readings¹ of early Chinese philosophy are 'overly Buddhist'. Somewhat paradoxically, I will not defend Ziporyn by dissociating his readings from their Buddhist influences, the connections here being quite obvious. I will argue instead that the implied reproach carried by this charge is completely wrong-headed. A Buddhist reading of Chinese philosophy can, in fact, allow for quite robustly plausible interpretations of many texts – especially if the Buddhism in question is Chinese. In other words, Ziporyn's readings of early Chinese thought do indeed emit Buddhist elements, but this is not in and of itself problematic. The core issue is rather to what degree these 'Buddhist elements' are actually *already* existent in, and have subsequently been carried over from, early Chinese thought in the development of Chinese Buddhism. Indeed, some scholars of Chinese Buddhism have pointed out that much of the vocabulary, concepts, and logic used in schools such as Tiantai may owe more to Daoist influences than to Buddhist ones. Accordingly, Ziporyn's 'overly Buddhist' approach might simply be an avenue of interpretation that is actually quite in line with the thinking in the early texts themselves, albeit one that is less familiar (i.e. an early Chinese Buddhist or Ziporyn's approach).

Another major goal of this review article, which will mainly be developed in the summary of *Emptiness and Omnipresence*, is to show how Ziporyn's theory concerning the importance of 'coherence' in early and later Chinese philosophy is also quite important in his introduction to Tiantai Buddhism. While Ziporyn almost entirely abstains from using the language of coherence in *Emptiness and Omnipresence*, much of what he writes actually rests on a strong coherence-based foundation, thereby demonstrating not Ziporyn's own prejudice, but rather the thoroughgoing importance

¹ This view has not, to my knowledge, been widely discussed in print. It is, however, quite common among professors and graduate students familiar with Ziporyn's work. Here I will not name names.

and versatility of his arguments on coherence. Indeed, when reflecting back on the criticisms made against Ziporyn for being overly Buddhist in his reading of pre-Buddhist Chinese thought, understanding the importance of coherence in his readings of Tiantai Buddhism (despite the fact that he does not explicitly use coherence-related vocabulary) only bolsters the defense against these claims.

1. Ironies of Oneness and Difference: making coherence coherent

In *Ironies of Oneness* Ziporyn begins with a deceptively simple question: ‘What do Chinese thinkers mean when they make those assertions we translate in the form of “This is that” – for example, “this is a horse”, or “human nature is good”’ (19). The first step, according to Ziporyn, is to notice that Chinese thought tends to be more process-oriented than substance-oriented. On this foundation, evaluating the validity of a ‘this is that’ statement relies on whether or not it is ‘acceptable’, which is contextually based (rather than being ‘true’). So the connection between things, or ‘this is that’ statements, concerns coherence. Here coherence, as Ziporyn understands it, speaks to the intelligible relations between things. In a tradition where ‘how’ questions have often trumped ‘what’ questions, and philosophy is largely conceived as a strategy for living, negotiating identity in terms of context and interaction makes sense. Defining coherence as a ‘way of hanging together’ Ziporyn further elaborates on its difference from an ontological approach, and how it is an essentially contextualized understanding:

in its broadest denotation it [coherence] will here point on the one hand to the mode of togetherness of any distinguishable (as opposed to ‘ontologically genuinely distinct’) elements contained ‘within’ a putative item, and on the other hand to the ways in which what is distinguished as this entire item is embedded in its environment. What would it mean if it were these factors, rather than ontological facts about what differs from what, to which we should look, in determining of ‘what a thing is’ and ‘how a thing functions’ and ‘what group to belongs to’ and ‘what can be reliably expected about it’? (6).

Ironies of Oneness thereby begins by first engaging with the relevant discussions of related issues in contemporary scholarship before tracing three types of coherence in classical pre-Qin texts. Ziporyn labels them ‘non-ironic, ironic, and non-ironic coherence appropriating ironic coherence into itself’ (11).

Ziporyn starts with ‘non-ironic coherence’, using it to describe how different things are made coherent when:

(1) they are *held together*, grouped, so that none moves ‘too far’ from the others; (2) they are *intelligible*, can be known and identified as a recognizable characteristic; (3) they create maximal pleasure and satisfaction, actualize value...; (4) they are sustainable and can thus continue into the future’ (126).

We find this type of coherence in the *Analects* and *Mencius* with discussions of, for instance, social harmony (harmony between the part and whole) exercised through the

observance of rituals. Unlike laws, rituals bring people together by having them find their appropriate place in the whole. Ziporyn suggests that Confucius' way promotes a type of coherence. In the *Analects*, descriptions of Confucius as having no constant teacher (19.22), enlarging the way (15.29), and seeing that way as a sort of unity (4.15) make sense if coherence is the underlying thread. In the *Mencius*, the discussion is extended to *xing* 性 or 'Human Nature', where certain tendencies are valued above others, based on their ability to cohere in Mencius' theory of values.²

The trouble with non-ironic coherence is that coherence itself can actually only ever be partial—in other words, there can only be partial overlap, only *some* qualities can be shared. Whatever is glossed as the identity of a thing in non-ironic coherence only speaks to the aspects of that thing as viewed from the perspective of the particular non-ironic coherence that sets out to incorporate that thing. A broader viewpoint exposes that coherence itself as incoherent; or to say it another way, coherence is ironic. Texts typically associated with 'Daoism', most notably the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, are taken as representatives of ironic coherence. They focus on not only the positive *yang* aspects of a thing but also the negative *yin* aspects as well (i.e., that which falls outside 'coherent' elements). Things are then viewed as fundamentally incoherent. But, as Ziporyn says, 'it is this incoherence that really makes them cohere, and really allows them to be what they are, which is what was claimed for the non-ironic coherence' (10). In terms of value, the same logic applies. 'The ironic coherence tradition claims that incoherence, and the nonattribution of value, is what makes value' (11). The remainder of the book focuses on the *Xunzi's* non-ironic rebuttal to ironic coherence and several 'compromise[s] of the ironic and non-ironic tradition from the side of the non-ironic' (227).

What Ziporyn suggests in *Ironies of Oneness* with the paradigm of coherence is nothing short of a sea change. The answers to other basic questions become transformed when our focus is shifted by the importance of coherence in early Chinese thought. For example, we can reapply what Ziporyn calls 'the Chinese coherence doctrines' – where, as he writes, 'every identity is instead *several* identities at once' (7) – to personal identities as well. Our alternative notion of identity would be neither an abstract nor antecedent self, nor the post-modern rejection of identity. It means instead recognizing that we are someone different depending on our social roles and context (as in Rosemont's and Ames's 'Confucian Role Ethics' (Rosemont 2015; Ames 2011)), even if that identity is taken on with only temporary commitment (as in Moeller and D'Ambrosio's Daoist 'Genuine Pretending'³ (Moeller and D'Ambrosio 2017)).

2. Beyond Oneness and Difference: the Buddhist connections

² One of the most cryptic sentences of the *Mencius* appears in 7A4: 'All things are provided in me, there is no greater joy than to examine myself and find *cheng* 誠 within me.' In his translation, Ziporyn throws out a handful of terms, ending the list with 'coherence' (128). While certainly not a viable translation of *cheng* in most contexts, it does at least provide substantial insight into the meaning of this sentence. (Ziporyn offers a longer discussion of *cheng* on pages 220–227.)

³ Ziporyn's own take on identity in the *Zhuangzi*, which he summarizes as the 'wild card' (162–183), was extremely influential in the development of genuine pretending (Moeller and D'Ambrosio 2017, 1–5).

After recapping the major arguments from *Ironies of Oneness*, Ziporyn turns, in *Beyond Oneness*, to the ‘strange history’ of *li* 理. Ziporyn considers not only how *li* was read back into early Chinese thought with greater standing after taking a ‘decisive role’ in Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, but also its role in modern scholarship. In the first chapter, Ziporyn looks closely at the work of Feng Youlan, Tang Junyi, Joseph Needham, Chad Hansen, A.C. Graham, and Willard Peterson, as well as Roger Ames and David Hall. In the next two chapters, he then moves on to describe ‘The Development of *Li* in Ironic Texts’ and ‘The Advent of *Li* as a Technical Philosophical Term’. After more groundwork has been laid, Chapter 5, ‘*Li* as the Convergence of Coherence and Incoherence in Wang Bi and Guo Xiang’, sets out to apply Ziporyn’s theory to explicating the two most famous Xuanxue thinkers.

In proportion to its importance, the Wei-Jin period or Xuanxue (‘Neo-Daoism’), receives relatively little attention. The label itself, Xuanxue, which is sometimes translated as ‘dark’, ‘mysterious’, or ‘arcane’ learning⁴ is fitting as a description of a group of thinkers whose philosophical systems are incredibly difficult to penetrate. Here we find the first major thinkers (in the Chinese philosophical tradition) who utilized commentary as a style for developing their own philosophical ideas. By and large, Xuanxue scholars, and especially Wang Bi and Guo Xiang, can be described as applying Daoist logic, terminology, and concepts in order to advance Confucian values. The uniqueness of Xuanxue, reflected in both its style and content, has been explained in a number of ways. Ziporyn’s discussion of *li* and coherence offers a new possibility that accounts for continuity through its understanding Wang Bi and Guo Xiang in terms of continuing the discourse on ironic and non-ironic coherence. In Ziporyn’s reading, which reverses scholarly consensus, Wang ‘introduces the idea of multiple individual [*lis*] as “mini-Daos”’ (184), whereas for Guo Xiang, who rejects Wang’s position, ‘there is only one ‘principle’ [or *li*] that underlies the phenomenal world [i.e., ‘self-so’ *ziran* 自然]’ (Chan 2010, 8). Building off the newfound philosophical importance of *li* expressed by these thinkers, Ziporyn demonstrates how Chinese Buddhism seamlessly continues this pre-Qin and Xuanxue discussion.

Ziporyn mainly considers the Huayan and Tiantai schools of Buddhism, as they are the ‘most “Sinitic” of the Chinese traditions of Buddhist doctrines’ and ‘because it is here that the term [*li*] is given its most distinctive, elaborate, and influential developments’ (185). In this context *li* becomes Emptiness.⁵ *Li* indicates a valued and intelligible grouping, something ‘worthwhile to notice about that class, or about all things’ (187). For Buddhists this is Emptiness. Weaving this into Chinese philosophical discourse, the ‘sinitic’ Buddhists call Emptiness ‘*li*’ (or they call *li* ‘Emptiness’). Each school expands on a different aspect of Guo Xiang’s philosophy. Huayan picks up on Guo’s empty *li* as the ‘principle of “no-principle”’ (312) and Tiantai expands on the idea that each thing is its own unique *li*. Through detailed readings of major Chinese Buddhist

⁴ Here *xuan* 玄 is ‘dark’, ‘mysterious’, or ‘arcane’ and *xue* 学 is often translated as ‘study’ or ‘learning’

⁵ Emptiness has a range of meanings in Mahāyāna Buddhism, and its equation with ‘*li*’ gives it new meanings, though the details are outside the scope of this article.

thinkers, Ziporyn is able to convincingly demonstrate how instrumental the discourse on non-ironic and ironic coherence, as well as the later developing significance of *li* as a philosophical term, was in shaping the creation of Chinese Buddhism.

Ziporyn's *Beyond Oneness and Difference* provides critical insights into one of the more overlooked periods in Chinese philosophy. Buddhism is sometimes viewed as a rift in the Chinese tradition, and its incorporation is thereby seen as a gradual process. However, looked at through the lens of non-ironic and ironic coherence, and more importantly, in conversation with Xuanxue scholars, it becomes clear that at least some schools of Chinese Buddhism were extremely 'Chinese' from the start. Few scholars are as well versed on the philosophy of Xuanxue and Chinese Buddhism as Ziporyn, and his arguments here present an insightful contribution.

3. *Emptiness and Omnipresence*: Tiantai Buddhism for all

Emptiness and Omnipresence is essentially an introduction to Tiantai Buddhism. Although this school played a major role in *Beyond Oneness*, the presentations of Tiantai Buddhism in these two books are distinct. For example, there are very few quotes in *Emptiness and Omnipresence*, the language of non-ironic and ironic coherence is largely absent, and Ziporyn does not connect Tiantai Buddhism to earlier philosophical debates in China. In *Emptiness and Omnipresence*, Ziporyn offers Tiantai arguments as valid ideas in and of themselves. He does not defer to 'what Buddhists think' or make other similar appeals to authority. Ziporyn's book is directed at the reader's general curiosity and philosophical interests. One gets the sense of moving through Ziporyn's thought process with him as he offers exceptionally clear explanations of complex ideas interwoven with everyday examples and humorous stories.

The book begins with an introduction to the basic Buddhist worldview, and gradually narrows in on the *Lotus Sūtra* – the main point of connection between Indian Buddhism and the Tiantai school. Through this late sutra, Tiantai extends the Mahāyāna's 'great vehicle' to include every mode of movement (or annihilate the very need for any vehicle). Ziporyn summarizes:

The *Lotus Sūtra* had made upāya ('skillful means') the centerpiece of Buddhism and asserted a unity of all practices in the One Vehicle, all leading toward Buddhahood. Tiantai follows this lead and constructs a vast and complex system to be used in accounting for and integrating all known forms of Buddhist and even non-Buddhist practice, all of which are acceptable skillful means that are appropriate and wholesome for different persons and times. It rejects nothing ... (144).

Additionally, a 'third truth' is added to the traditional Buddhist two truths (i.e., conventional and ultimate truth). This is the 'Center', which Ziporyn defines as the 'non-duality between conventional and ultimate truth, their intersubsumption, their synonymity' (145). The 'Center' collapses the significance of conventional and ultimate

truths as fundamentally distinct – relating them instead in yin-yang fashion. Ziporyn writes,

The Center means that conventional truth is also ultimate truth, that ultimate truth is also conventional truth—that the very distinction between them is itself only conventional, and yet, since by this very move the conventional is not merely conventional but is also ultimate, this very distinction is itself also therefore ultimate. Tiantai regards this move as simply the thinking through of the Two Truths to their logical conclusion (145).

The two quotes above appear in Chapter 8, ‘Tiantai: The Multiverse as You’. In Chapter 9, ‘Experiencing Tiantai: Experiments with Tiantai Practice’, Ziporyn masterfully explains how one can view the world from this Tiantai perspective. The final chapter of the book, ‘Tiantai Ethics and the Worst-Case Scenario’ explores how experiencing the world through a Tiantai lens leads to a radical, counter-conventional, paradox-infused ethical understanding.

Importantly, *Emptiness and Omnipresence* is implicitly linked to Ziporyn’s studies on *li* and his theory of coherence. As mentioned above, Ziporyn does not use the terminology from his coherence books, and he hardly cites these works. He has even gone so far as to say that ‘*Emptiness and Omnipresence* doesn’t really continue the *Li as Coherence* discussion’.⁶ However, it seems that Ziporyn’s reading, like Confucius’ ‘single thread that runs through it all’ (*Analects* 4.15), relies on coherence as a constant underlying basis. For example, Ziporyn interprets Tiantai’s unique collapsing of the Two Truths as participating in the discussion on coherence:

Hence the two seemingly opposite positions of the Two Truths turn out to be two alternate ways of saying the same thing: (1) to be identifiable is to be coherent, (2) to be coherent is to be locally coherent, and (3) to be locally coherent is to be globally incoherent (151).

And this, in turn, is linked to the idea of the ‘Center’ (153-156). So while Ziporyn does not directly connect this to *li* or to earlier Chinese texts, based on his previous books their relevance is clear.

The Tiantai experience is similarly structured in terms of coherence. For instance, we sometimes have conflicting emotions like being angry at someone while simultaneously loving them, or enjoying and hating writing book reports. How can it be possible that these emotions coexist? Tiantai Buddhism teaches, Ziporyn says, that ‘the borders we imagine between moments in time are *incoherent*’ (198). With feelings of anger this means ‘it’s always both “anger-non-anger” given the locally coherent name “anger” or “non-anger” (or indeed “anger-non-anger”) only temporarily, provisionally, within a certain local context’ (198). Ziporyn concludes:

⁶ Personal communication, July 29, 2017.

We have seen that Tiantai epistemology holds that each moment of experience is the encounter of two local coherences (a sense organ and a sense object) producing a third local coherence (the arising of a moment of experience). But all three of these local coherences are also globally incoherent and intersubsumptive (205).

Clearly, the importance of coherence in earlier Chinese philosophical thinking is extremely important for the development in Tiantai of paradoxical ways of thinking through Buddhist topics. Though Ziporyn had already made the connections between Tiantai Buddhism and pre-Buddhist Chinese thought clear in his previous works, the fact that coherence shines through even in this introduction (*Emptiness and Omnipresence*), and even when Ziporyn says it should not, only serves to better prove his argument for the importance of coherence.

For many scholars, the introduction of Buddhism represents a significant rift in the Chinese tradition, but Chinese interpretations of Buddhism can also be viewed as simply another phase in the discourse. Read in this way, not only can Chinese Buddhism be viewed differently, but early Chinese philosophical texts take on new meanings as well.

Concluding remarks

In Ziporyn's latest three monographs, especially in the first two (and his prior writings on Guo Xiang, *Zhuangzi*, as well as his abridged translation of the *Zhuangzi*), Ziporyn offers perspectives on several early Chinese philosophical texts that are wildly distinct from more familiar readings in English. Ziporyn's unique view should not, however, disqualify his readings in any way. Divergent and even conflicting readings of a single text can offer valuable insights, despite their disagreements with more established interpretations. For example, many contemporary Chinese scholars simply continue to expound general themes in the tradition (cf. Wang 2004; Chen 2008; Yang 2009; Wang 2010), and they find the popular discussions in English, which claim that the *Zhuangzi* expresses a general relativist or skeptical philosophy (e.g., Kjellberg and Ivanhoe 1996), to be obviously wrong. Truly, classical commentators from Guo Xiang to Wang Fuzhi have acknowledged relativistic and skeptical features of the *Zhuangzi*, but find that the text ultimately moves beyond them. But the divergence in English and Chinese between the importance placed on the discussion of relativism and skepticism in the *Zhuangzi* does not delegitimize either side. (Or if it does, it says we should be cautious about using the labels 'relativism' and 'skepticism' to describe a text that simply incorporates these elements into a larger philosophical outlook.)

Similarly, Ziporyn's translations and explanations might seem overly 'Buddhist' to an English-speaking audience, despite having sound traditional foundations. I find at least two reasons to question this criticism of Ziporyn. Firstly, even if Ziporyn were dragging Buddhist ideas into Classical Chinese philosophy it would be possible for him to be doing so in a responsible manner. Academia today (at least when respecting history) generally accepts that there can be no interpretation 'from nowhere'; all scholars bring

their own philosophical baggage to any reading. Recognizing this, it is perhaps incumbent upon us to judge explications of philosophical texts not according to some supposed ‘original meaning’, but rather according to whether or not they are –to speak in modern Chinese – ‘thorough’ or ‘consistent’ (*tong* 通) in terms of the historical setting and development of the text itself. Only on this basis can any comparative philosophical discourse (or philosophical discourse itself) take place. To paraphrase Roger Ames: ‘Western scholars cannot do non-comparative “Chinese philosophy”, they always bring some degree of philosophical assumptions from their tradition, and are thereby engaged in “Comparative philosophy”.’

Secondly, and more importantly, the Buddhism that Ziporyn supposedly crutches on is more steeped in Chinese and Daoist thought than on Indo-Tibetan Buddhism.⁷ As shown in *Beyond Oneness and Difference*, Chinese Buddhism is a continuous part of the Chinese tradition that is arguably closer to its Chinese interpretative context than to Indian resources. For example, many of the arguments expounded by Seng Zhao 僧肇 (d. 414) are clear developments of Guo Xiang’s work, which are, in turn, developed from the *Zhuangzi*.⁸ In this way it could be argued that much of Seng Zhao’s work is established on the *Zhuangzi*, which means that when we look at the issue the other way, Seng Zhao actually gives us access to new ways of interpreting the *Zhuangzi* – ones that do not necessarily pollute an ‘accurate’ reading of the text. Early Chinese thought contributed quite significantly to what became known as Chinese Buddhism – which is further evidenced by the widespread disputes about exactly when Buddhist ideas entered China.⁹ Thus, reading the *Zhuangzi* through Seng Zhao simply highlights aspects of the text that might be somewhat less familiar.

Regardless of his philosophical allegiances, Ziporyn’s work has provided significant contributions to the way we read Chinese thought and to the debate about the degree to which Chinese Buddhism is integrated into previous philosophical concerns. To quote a reader of this review who wishes to remain anonymous:

The first main takeaway, and perhaps value, of these interpretative moves is the desire they arouse to go back to the primary texts and work through them anew, testing and rethinking familiar texts line by line; the strength of the readings lies in the questions they raise about the validity of the readings, waiting to be determined for better or worse in a new engagement with the materials.

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⁷ Additionally, Ziporyn learned his Buddhism entirely in Chinese, from Chinese sources, and is often accused by scholars of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism of being overly ‘Chinese’.

⁸ See D’Ambrosio, Kantor, and Moeller, ‘Incongruent Names: A Theme in the History of Chinese Philosophy’ (D’Ambrosio, Kantor, and Moeller 2018).

⁹ Jia Jinhua, for instance, believes that Guo Xiang, as well as his predecessors, were likely exposed to Buddhism (Jia 2015), while Ziporyn thinks Buddhist ideas became well known sometime after Guo’s death (Ziporyn 2003).

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