H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tao Jiang. *Contexts And Dialogue: Yogācāra Buddhism And Modern Psychology on the Subliminal Mind (Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy Monographs).* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006. xi + 198 pp. $20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8248-3106-6.

Reviewed by James Behuniak (Department of Philosophy, Colby College)
Published on H-Buddhism (August, 2007)

In the forty years since the Society for Asian and Comparative

Philosophy (SACP) was first established, there have been major shifts in our understanding of what "comparative philosophy" is and of how it is to be conducted. In this, the twenty-first volume in the society's series, Tao Jiang addresses the central issues of comparative methodology directly. As the main title of his book suggests, Jiang's comparative methodology focuses on "Contexts and Dialogue." As his subtitle suggests, this is also a work on the topic of the "subliminal mind" as presented in Yogācāra Buddhism and in modern western psychology. Jiang's unusual decision to name his book after his methodology rather than after his topic underscores the importance of that methodology to his work. The decision reinforces one of the book's central points: that "even though the accidental nature of drawing particular parallels between [disparate philosophical traditions] is hard to avoid … there needs to be a more methodic reflection on the very comparative context within which these parallels are made" (p. 6). In other words, methodological considerations must precede comparative considerations regardless of what the objects under consideration might be. On this occasion, Jiang argues that scholars do well to be more circumspect when drawing parallels between notions drawn from modern western psychology and Buddhism. As Jiang explains, until aparticular set of "what," "why," and "how" questions concerning these notions are clarified and understood (pp. 107, 145), any comparison is liable to be made on the basis of similarities that are superficial at best. Jiang defends this thesis most convincingly.

Yogācāra Buddhists first posited the notion of _ālayavijñāna_ (the subliminal "storehouse consciousness") in response to a set of specific issues within the conceptual framework of Abhidharma scholastic studies. Of chief interest to them was the "problematic of continuity" of the self (p. 33) in response to which Buddhist thinkers attempted to make sense of personal continuity without resorting to reified notions of substance that would violate the most basic teachings of the tradition. Jiang reminds us that "how" _ālayavijñāna_ responds to these issues is the "why" of its very postulation; hence, the "what" of its nature is adequately ascertained only in the context established by the "how" and the "why" questions. The most valuable constructive work that Jiang does within the rubric of this comparative exercise is done in his first two chapters. There, he presents a concise and illuminative account of the "how," "why," and "what" regarding the origin of the concept of _ālayavijñāna_ in the Indian tradition and its subsequent development by the seventh-century Chinese Buddhist thinker, Xuan Zang.

For those who are unfamiliar with Yogācāra philosophy generally or with Xuan Zang specifically, chapters 1 and 2 will be very edifying reading. Jiang presents the remarkably subtle, systematic reasoning of the Yogācāra school with utmost clarity and deft, illuminating also how Xuan Zang develops theories inherited from the Indian tradition. Remaining true to his own modesty, having "neither the ambition nor the ability to make this research exhaustive or definitive" (p. 17), Jiang displays good judgment in his decisions about which discussions to take up, which to relegate to footnotes, and which to defer altogether. Such good judgment keeps his prose moving at a steady pace, even when the complexity of the material begins to test the reader's stamina, as it surely will at times. As anyone who has tried will know, there is no very clear-cut way to present ideas such as the "four conditioning relationships" among the "eight consciousnesses" in Xuan Zang's _Cheng Weishi Lun_ (pp. 71-77). Given the inherent subtlety of the material, Jiang succeeds in presenting his subject clearly and effectively. Still, one does wish that he would occasionally utilize some sort of heuristic device, such as a chart or a diagram, to help his less proficient readers secure the fuller picture. That said, Jiang's presentation in these two

early chapters is systematic, lucid, and admirably clear; together they are the showcase of the book.

Having outlined the specific "how," "why," and "what" regarding the emergence of the subliminal mind in Yogācāra Buddhism, Jiang completely shifts gears in chapter 3 to consider the "how," "why," and "what" regarding the emergence of the subliminal mind in the theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. The felt abruptness of this topical shift actually serves rather felicitously in demonstrating Jiang's central methodological point. Before the reader has even digested the myriad intricacies of Abhidharma metaphysics, Buddhist soteriology, and Yogācāra philosophy in India and China, the discussion shifts to dream interpretation, archetypes, and wish-fulfillment. One feels as though one has been thrust headlong into another galaxy. Augmenting the jarring thematic dissonance, readers will notice that Jiang's treatment of both Freud and Jung (in a mere nineteen pages) is nowhere near as path-breaking, extensive, and systematic as his treatment of Yogācāra Buddhism (in sixty-five pages). He cautions, at the outset of chapter 3, that Freud's theory of the unconscious is "difficult to present in a single picture" (p. 87), and subsequently reports that key Jungian notions are "difficult to define" because they are "full of ambiguities and contradictions," and without "coherent definition(s)" (p. 104, 111). Along with the unmistakable change of pace, one discerns here some change in command of the subject matter as well. Regardless, Jiang's presentation of the foundational notions of modern western psychology is effective: it is well informed, well annotated, and wholly sufficient for his methodological purposes. It is becoming clear by this juncture that Jiang is proving his points.

In chapter 4, the two paradigms of Yogācāra Buddhism and modern psychology are finally juxtaposed. They are compared according to three general themes: individuality, collectivity, and personhood, and analyzed according to how each of these three themes is "schematized" within each paradigm. Not surprisingly, there are vast differences between these paradigms and schemas. Xuan Zang's notion of individuality, like Freud's and Jung's, is closely related to subliminal activities, but according to Jiang, "this is the extent of their similarity" (p. 109). The themes of "collectivity" and "personhood" in these traditions entail notions that are equally suggestive of superficial similarities, but schematizations of such notions in context reveal vast philosophical differences between them. As Jiang conclusively argues, "Xuan Zang's _ālayavijñāna_ is neither Freud's unconscious nor Jung's unconscious with respect to their thematic contents, operative presuppositions, and objectives" (p. 126).

The forgone conclusion seems to be that whenever one draws a conceptual link between the notion of the "subliminal mind" in Yogācāra Buddhism and modern western psychology, one is essentially comparing apples to alligators and must assume all the intellectual risks of doing so. Having now so successfully contrasted the contexts in which such disparate notions of the subliminal mind operate, one wonders if Jiang can proceed to live up to the compound promise of his book ("Contexts _and_ Dialogue") and still avoid being victim to his own success. The effect, at least through chapter 4, is to present a set of radically dissimilar contexts. Jiang's success in arguing for the disparity of operational "paradigms" (p. 126) established by Yogācāra, Freud, and Jung leaves one wondering just why there would even emerge any "dialogue" between them, and more importantly, what dividends could possibly be distributed between these isolated frameworks. There is, however, much to be gained by the responsible comparison and creative integration of these paradigms. In the remainder of the book, these issues take center stage.

In chapter 5, "Accessibility of the Subliminal Mind: Transcendence versus Immanence," the topic turns to the ontological status of the relative "barriers" between different levels of consciousness in these traditions. Jiang develops the category of "asymmetrical transcendence" to describe the ontological relationship between both the id and the ego in Freud, and the personal and ego consciousnesses in Jung (pp. 133-134). What Jiang uncovers is a deep, ontological presupposition that locates Freud and Jung within the larger paradigm of western thinking on transcendence itself, a paradigm that Jiang identifies briskly but not unconvincingly with the influence of Plato and Kant (p. 136). The "barriers" to different levels of consciousness in Yogācāra Buddhism, on the other hand, are shown to be "dispositional, not structural" (p. 142). According to Buddhism, one's mind becomes defiled not by virtue of a dualistic structure within consciousness itself, but rather, the problem lies with the disposition of the mind to engage in dualistic thinking. Mental activities that posit erroneous ontological distinctions give rise to attachment in the Buddhist view. Yogācāra Buddhism, therefore, points to an "immanence-based conception of mind," one that regards "mental life as an integrated domain with varying degrees of awareness of various aspects of its activities" (p. 140). Having successfully curbed his reader's tolerance for hasty and superficial comparisons, it is satisfying that the final comparative "dialogue" that Jiang initiates (however brief that dialogue is, relative to its preparation) cuts so

ontologically deep. The difference in ontological "accessibility" exhibited in these two models of mind is a difference much more fundamental than any superficial similarity that one might detect at first glance. Chapter 5 is thus a fit concluding movement to this generally fine book.

In sum, Jiang's book succeeds on three levels: first, it offers an exceptionally clear introduction to Yogācāra Buddhism; second, it illuminates one very general and important difference between the models of mind in Buddhism and western psychology; and finally, it provides the right methodological cue for scholars engaged in comparative philosophical work. One leaves this book convinced that synthetic dialogue between Buddhism and modern psychology is possible, but that it will falter without adequate analysis of the paradigmatic differences that shape their respective projects.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: James Behuniak. Review of Jiang, Tao, *Contexts And Dialogue: Yogācāra Buddhism And Modern Psychology on the Subliminal Mind (Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy Monographs).* H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. August, 2007.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13537

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.