The study of the Yogācāra revival in early republican China has garnered a growing level of scholarly attention in the English-language studies of Buddhism, due to this revival's influence both inside and outside of the field of Buddhist studies. Centering on the life and work of Ouyang Jingwu 歐陽竟無 (1871–1943), a Buddhist layman, scholar, educator, and a key proponent of this Yogācāra revival, Eyal Aviv's new book, Differentiating the Pearl from the Fish-Eye: Ouyang Jingwu and the Revival of Scholastic Buddhism (2020), details Ouyang's scholastic approach to Buddhism, which encourages readers to deliberate upon the quest for authenticity in Chinese intellectual history. Aviv's book fills a crucial niche in the English-language scholarship on Ouyang and further enriches the study of the Yogācāra revival in the Republican period.

In his book, Aviv depicts the academic trajectory of Ouyang, portraying how this protagonist continued to expand his project of Buddhist scholasticism in a time of personal and social crisis. This book makes a pivotal contribution to the field, since it provides a more nuanced picture of the protagonist's quest for authenticity. Ouyang is commonly believed to have regarded the indigenous Chinese Buddhist orthodoxies as inauthentic, yet Aviv challenges this widely held assumption. As he nicely captures it, Ouyang was initially adamant that a more critical and selective scholastic approach to Buddhism would fit modern China and its people, but he gradually embraced a more syncretic approach inclusive of indigenous Chinese Buddhism and envisioned to harmonize Buddhism with Confucianism. Aviv delves deeper into Ouyang's life and thought to provide readers with a scope to understand how intellectuals in early republican China strove to initiate their respective projects to rethink human wellbeing, revive their tradition, and reform their country into a modern nation.

After introducing the concept of authenticity and its importance in Chinese history, chapter 1 portraits Ouyang's scholarly trajectory. This chapter begins by recounting how Ouyang was raised as a Confucian literatus and drawn to the Lu-wang school of Confucianism—a school of Neo-Confucianism known for its study of mind-nature. Living in a time of drastic social change, Ouyang, like many of his contemporaries, experienced a shared sense of crisis, which brought him to the realization that Buddhism could provide modern China with a more ideal worldview than Confucianism. This chapter continues to describe the
mentorship Ouyang received from Yang Wenhui 楊文會 (1837–1911), a pioneer of Buddhist revival who introduced Ouyang to Yogācāra, as well as a new style of lay Buddhism. Later becoming a teacher himself, Ouyang managed to build his own community of lay Buddhists and to establish the Chinese Buddhist Studies Institute (Zhina Neixueyuan 支那內學院) in 1919. There, he brought to fruition his Buddhist scholasticism for pursuing the authentic version of the Buddha’s teaching. In chronological order, the first chapter traces three overlapping influences on the protagonist’s intellectual transformation: the overall sociopolitical climate, Ouyang’s philosophical interlocutors, and his scholarly network.

Chapters 2–4 map out major themes in the early stage of Ouyang’s development of Buddhist scholasticism. Chapter 2 elucidates his critique of indigenous forms of Chinese Buddhism (i.e., Chan 禪, Tiantai 天台, and Huayan 華嚴). As explicated in this chapter, Ouyang targeted Chan’s anti-intellectualism, further deeming the philosophical argumentation preserved in the Tiantai and Huayan texts to be unrefined and distorted in comparison to Yogācāra. This chapter continues to analyze the ways in which Ouyang scrutinized the doctrinal syncretism prevalent in Yogācāra revival in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), when scholar-monks introduced Yogācāra ideas to refashion the teachings of Chan, Tiantai, and Huayan. To conclude, this chapter ascribes Ouyang’s concerns with Chinese Buddhism to his conviction that indigenous Chinese Buddhist orthodoxies flourished out of a problematic root qua the sinicized doctrine of tathāgatagarbha (rulaizang 如來藏, p. 68). Once sinicized, Buddhist thought became conflated with the vagueness and unsystematicity of Chinese culture, which made indigenous Chinese Buddhism deviant from the original Indian Buddhism and unfavorable for modernity. Following this line of reasoning, Ouyang was resolute that he must recuperate the one and only true Buddhist doctrine with enough textual support to rebuild Buddhism on a more solid doctrinal foundation, in order to reform it into a modern teaching. In his pursuit of doctrinal authenticity, Ouyang engaged in the debate over the Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna (Dacheng qixin lun 大乘起信論, T1666; henceforth Awakening of Faith).

Chapter 3 reviews the debate over the Awakening of Faith, a text known for its tathāgatagarbha theory that presents the mind as the unity of the unconditioned suchness (inherently awake and unpolluted by misconception) and the conditioned phenomena (polluted by adventitious defilement and false conceptualization). This chapter first describes the controversies over the Awakening of Faith’s disputed authorship among Japanese intellectuals in the early 1900s. Moving to the Chinese context, this chapter shows how intellectuals gradually placed more weight on doctrinal authenticity (whether the text expresses the correct view of Buddhism) than textual authenticity (whether there is objective evidence for authorship). Centering on Ouyang’s critical evaluation of the Awakening of Faith published in 1922, this chapter details a twofold problem of the tathāgatagarbha theory: the conflation of correct cognition (as part of the conditioned dharma) with the unconditioned suchness, and the ambivalent nature of the mind as simultaneously polluted and unpolluted. It then becomes clear that Ouyang deemed the tathāgatagarbha doctrine in the Awakening of Faith to be the problematic root of indigenous Chinese Buddhism due to its philosophical vagueness and unsystematicity. Afterwards, this chapter unpacks how Ouyang turned to Yogācāra texts and reworked the essence-function (ti-yong 體用) binary to outline an alternative theory of the fluid transformation of the unconditioned suchness, consciousness, and conditioned phenomena—a theory that would provide a more plausible doctrinal foundation of the authentic Buddhist teaching. Ouyang’s critique of the Awakening of Faith soon received numerous counterattacks. As a key player in this debate, Ouyang inspired his contemporaries to rethink their ap-
proaches to Buddhism and refine their proposals on Buddhist modernism.

Upon demarcating the authentic teaching from inauthentic ones, or in figurative terms, upon differentiating the pearl from the fish-eye, chapter 4 examines the constructive aspect of Ouyang's Buddhist scholasticism that is encapsulated in his articulation of the weishi-faxiang paradigm. The weishi (唯識, consciousness-only) paradigm epitomizes a mind-only non-dualism, beyond nihilism and essentialism, which stresses the “cognitive role in constructing our reality,” and is by its nature epistemologically idealist (p. 117). This paradigm is aimed at advanced followers, like the Bodhisattvas, and is supported mainly by Yogācāra texts. In contrast, the faxiang (法相, dharma-characteristics) paradigm is broader in its scope on the “middle path of neither existence nor emptiness” and on that which “appears to us as conventionally real,” further yielding “a method of contemplation to all Buddhist categories” for Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna followers alike (pp. 114-115). Most faxiang scriptures pertain to the Abhidharma tradition. This chapter underscores that weishi and faxiang complement one another in Ouyang's architectonic of Buddhist scholasticism, for they exclude inauthentic Buddhist texts and doctrines, and establish a new framework for Buddhism beyond the Sino-Indic rift or the Mahāyāna-Hinayāna divide. Not surprisingly, Ouyang's twofold paradigm theory triggered another controversy among Buddhist scholars and scholar-monks championed by Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947) and Yinshu 印順 (1906–2005). As pinpointed in this chapter, the exchange between Ouyang and his critics alludes to a more profound divergence between Ouyang's selective/critical approach and Taixu's syncretic approach to modernizing Chinese Buddhism.

Chapter 5 traces how Ouyang revised his critical analysis of Buddhist texts in his later thought. Having lived through personal tragedies and social turmoil, Ouyang found it urgent to shift his priority to soteriology. As a result, he expanded his scope to embrace a more syncretic and inclusive approach to Buddhism. This chapter explores two aspects of this expanded approach. First, Ouyang reinterpreted the theory of “nirvāṇa without remainder (wuyuyi niepan 無餘涅槃)” as the soteriological goal shared by all Buddhist practices regardless of their sectarian affiliations (p. 144). Second, he revisited the theory of tathāgatagarbha, further demarcating the authentic meaning of this concept from the inauthentic understanding preserved in the Awakening of Faith. Retaining his critique of the Awakening of Faith, Ouyang espoused a weaker reading of this concept from the Yogācāra perspective in which tathāgatagarbha was perceived as a conditioned dharma and the “aspect of the ālayavijñana that contains the innate untainted (anāsrava) seeds” (p. 150). More importantly, this chapter presents Ouyang's attempt to harmonize Buddhism with Confucianism in an effort to propose a resolution to the political crisis at that time. There, Ouyang initiated a similar quest for authentic Confucianism. He advocated that Buddhism and Confucianism complemented each other as two correlated aspects of self-cultivation that would end individual suffering and transform society. As remarked in this chapter, Ouyang's later thought can be conceived as both “a departure from” and “an evolution of” his early pursuit of authenticity (p. 161).

The last chapter reviews the legacy of Ouyang's Buddhist scholasticism. This chapter recognizes Ouyang's determination to develop Buddhist scholasticism in order to liberate China and the Chinese from suffering. It then recounts how Ouyang challenged scholar-monks like Taixu to engage critically with their tradition, motivated Buddhist scholars like Lü Cheng 呂瀓 (1896–1989) to reform Buddhist studies into an academic discipline outside the monasteries, and inspired modern Confucians like Xiong Shili 熊十力 (1885–1968) to rearticulate Confucian philosophy. Upon the rise of Chinese nationalism and the enforcement
of Marxist orthodoxy in mainland China beginning in the 1950s, Ouyang's project of Buddhist scholasticism, due to its critique of indigenous Chinese culture, gradually declined. Nevertheless, as showcased toward the end of this chapter, at a time when intercultural philosophy and Buddhist modernism continue to thrive, Ouyang's work continues to capture the interest of academics and monastics, which indicates how the quest for authenticity remains significant for a living tradition like Buddhism.

One of the invaluable features of this book is that Aviv shows a sympathetic understanding of Ouyang and does not shun the ambiguities in his work. Thus readers are presented not only with a case study of a Buddhist scholar named Ouyang Jingwu, but also with the personal negotiations and struggles of the protagonist, who lived at a time of drastic sociohistorical change in East Asia. We can therefore understand more deeply that, for Ouyang, the pursuit of authenticity becomes a crucial step in the incorporation of Buddhist thought into Chinese modernity in order to relieve individual suffering and resolve social crisis, a pursuit Ouyang gallantly embarked on and from which he never backed down.

After reading this impressive book, I hope to know more about two points that Aviv has addressed but not investigated. First, Ouyang's quest for authenticity entails his vision of a modern form of Chinese Buddhism. Yet how would Ouyang formulate such a modernism? It seems that Ouyang entertained a version of modernism that did not challenge a lot of dichotomies at the heart of the colonial discourse. Did Ouyang ever deliberate upon the problematic nature of these dichotomies from a Buddhist perspective of nonduality? Second, Ouyang's turn towards a Buddhist-Confucian syncretism was motivated by his aspiration to resolve the political crisis in China. Yet was it the case that Ouyang could not derive such a resolution from Buddhist theories per se? As discussed by Aviv, Ouyang perceived Buddhism as the teaching for individual liberation in contrast to Confucianism's function for social reform. Does this mean that, for Ouyang, Buddhism cannot guide sentient beings to realize universal awakening without the help of Confucianism? To put it differently, is Buddhist-Confucian syncretism the result of or the reason for Mahāyāna universal salvation?

These questions, however, do not change the fact that Differentiating the Pearl from the Fish-Eye makes a crucial contribution to the field. This groundbreaking book focuses on Ouyang's Buddhist scholasticism but also goes beyond. It stands at the intersection of Yogācāra studies, Buddhist philosophy, Buddhist modernism, and modern Confucianism, and is, therefore, of great importance to scholars who work in these fields.

Notes

in Modern China (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[2]. Yogācāra is a school of Mahāyāna Buddhism known for using the study of consciousness to argue for emptiness and compassion.

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