

“Representative Men of Japan”

Learning from Book Written by Christian/Thinker K. Uchimura

By Etsuo KOZAWA

John F. Kennedy, the 35th president of the United States, was asked by a Japanese reporter in 1961: “Who is the Japanese politician you respect most?” He replied: “Uesugi Yozaan,” a *daimyo* (feudal lord) who governed what now is Yonezawa, Yamagata Prefecture, in northeastern Japan, from around the second half of the 18th century to the beginning of the 19th century during the middle period of the Edo era (1603-1867). Yozaan was known as an enlightened leader who reconstructed his financially failed provincial government. In his political philosophy, he considered it the ruler’s mission not to pamper his people, but rather to commit himself and his officers to be the “fathers and mothers of the people.” In short, it was important for him to administer the affairs of his dominion with politics that properly brought together “self-help” among people, “mutual support” of neighborhoods and “assistance” extended by the local feudal government.

Among wise sayings he left was one that said: “If you do it, you can accomplish anything. Just do it. If you do not, you can never accomplish anything.” President Kennedy was said to have cherished it and it reportedly became the source of the famous portion of his inaugural speech: “And so my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.”

I believe his speech told of the spirit of self-help and mutual support that is indispensable to politics instead of dependence on assistance from the state and that its importance transcended times and the nation. I feel I am proud of knowing that there was a Japanese politician who had an ideological impact on a US president.

1908 Book Published in English

Kanzo Uchimura, a Japanese Christian and thinker who was active from the late 19th century to the first part of the 20th century, published a book titled “*Representative Men of Japan*” in English in 1908. In the book, he tried to inform European countries and the United States – advanced nations at the time – of men in Japan who were not Christian but were of strong moral fiber and high caliber.

Yozaan was one of them. The book also took up men like Saigo Takamori, Ninomiya Sontoku, Nakae Toju and Saint Nichiren.

The reason I was fascinated with the book was that while avaricious capitalism has become questionable in the world following the financial crisis triggered by the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in 2008, the five men described in the book were all completely free from being selfish, never seeking material wants and fame. I thought it important to learn from the spirit of

such men with a high sense of public duty and morality to correct capitalism of the present era focused on going all out just for the sake of earning profits. Reading through the book I became interested in Sontoku along with Yozaan.

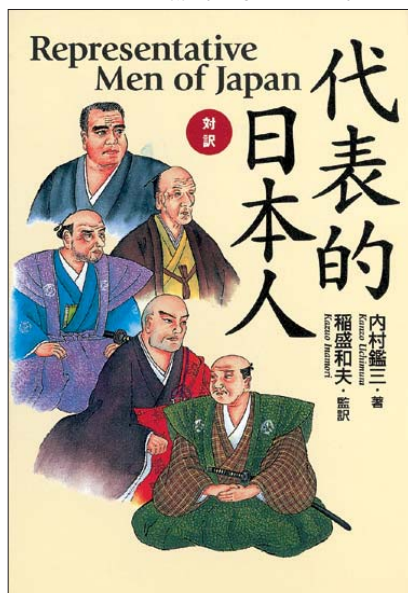
Sontoku pushed ahead with efforts to improve farmland in poor villages in the early part of the 19th century, won fame among farmers and was in the end commissioned by senior officials of the Tokugawa *shogunate* government in Edo (now Tokyo) to turn a number of ruined villages to better conditions. Although he was a son born of a poor farm household, he was notable for attaching importance to the power of Confucian morality as an element of reforming the farm village economy. It was quite unusual for *shogunate* officials in the era of the feudal class system to ask him directly to carry out reform, but he became neither mean-spirited nor pompous. He was a man who simply undertook the task of bringing about happiness to farmers by trying to spread moral law he believed to farm villages.

Author Reveals Sontoku’s Thought

I quote a part from Uchimura’s original book written in English, which I believe expressed Sontoku’s thought most appropriately:

“The art of love alone can restore peace and abundance to those poor people. Grants in money, or release from taxes, will in no way help them in their distress. Indeed, one secret of their salvation lies in withdrawing all monetary help from them. Such help only induces avarice and indolence, and is a fruitful source of dissensions among the people. The wilderness must be opened by its own resources, and poverty must be made to rescue itself...Love, diligence, self-help – in the strict enforcement of these virtues lies the hope of these villages; and I should not wonder if, 10 years from this date, with patient application of ourselves in the work with all sincerity, we bring them back

Photo: KODANSHA INTERNATIONAL LTD.



Written in English by Kanzo Uchimura & translated into Japanese under supervision of Kazuo Inamori

to their original prosperity.”

His way of thinking like the above with emphasis on the power of morality as an element of economic reform is very refreshing to those of us who are accustomed to the idea that the market is everything. Commenting on Sontoku's philosophy, Uchimura called it puritanical. Considering that the Puritan way of thinking was the basics of classical capitalism in the era of Adam Smith and not avaricious capitalism of the present, it is probably possible to say that Sontoku was the very person who quickly applied Smith's philosophy to economic activities in Japan. It is often said that “you can't worry about etiquette on an empty stomach” or “well fed, well bred” and that it is not until achievement of economic development that we can enhance a sense of morality. However, I am inclined to think there is another side to the saying in that “abundant food and clothing become available because you have learned etiquette.”

Sontoku was unique in seeking morality as a driving force of economic development unlike economists today. His way of thinking was fresh in terms of finding an exit leading to world economic recovery after the financial crisis. Textbook-style economics sees human beings as nothing but self-profit seekers, but in reality they are not such simple beings. Considering the complexity of humans who could become “god or devil,” I cannot help but think the role played by morality is vital. I believe Sontoku presented us with important challenges in considering the future form of capitalism in the world. We can even say safely that if non-materialistic and intangible value is to have an impact on materialistic and tangible value, it will lead the existing economics to a new horizon.

Two Men Similar in Thought

The difference between Yozan and Sontoku is that the former was a feudal lord while the latter came from a poor farming family to become a reformer of farm villages, but they were very close in terms of thought. As stated above, they pointed out the importance of “self-help” and “mutual support” and stressed that people should not be spoiled. At the same time, they expected very lofty morality from rulers.

Declaring “the people's happiness is the ruler's happiness” and the ruler and his officers are the “fathers and mothers of the people,” Yozan said:

“The child has no knowledge of its own; but she who mothers it understands its needs and ministers thereto because she does this from her sincere heart. Sincerity begets love, and love begets knowledge...As is the mother to her child, so must the officer be to his



Painted image of Uesugi Yozan, an enlightened feudal lord known for his saying: “If you do it, you can accomplish anything...If you do not, you can never accomplish anything.”

people. If but the heart that loves the people lies in you, you need not lament that lack of wisdom in you.”

When a village mayor who completely lost his villagers' confidence came to Sontoku for his advice, he made the following reply:

“Because love of self is strong in you. Selfishness is of beasts; and a selfish man is of beast-kind. You can have influence over your people only by giving yourself and your all to them. Sell your land, your house, your raiment, your all, and whatever money you get thereby contribute to the village fund, and give yourself wholly to the service of the people.”

First of all, a ruler should not think of self but think about others. Love and thoughtfulness for others are the basics of politics. Sontoku believed that no matter whether the leader was logical and rich in knowledge, he could not bring about good politics unless the basics were materialized.

I imagine that if a senior person arms himself with such benevolence in leading others at the workplace of a corporation, a place that may not be comparable to the major political stage, his workers will naturally show good teamwork and achieve fruitful results. I also think the two “representative Japanese men” – Yozan and Sontoku – preached important truths common to corporate management.

Finally, I would like to touch on “patriotism” that I thought in my own way as I finished reading the book. The Japanese men introduced in the book, not just Yozan and Sontoku but others, were all talented persons that Japan can boast to the world. I think I can proudly recommend that readers of *Japan SPOTLIGHT* in other countries make use of these men's philosophy by all means for the sustenance of your lives or as a guiding principle in your work. People should not uselessly be provoked into feeling a sense of patriotism over the scale of their country's GDP or victory or defeat in a game. People each have in their countries cultural heritage such as literature and art and outstanding human talents such as the ones mentioned in “*Representative Men in Japan*.” They should be proud of all these. Just as we learn from similar culture in other nations, make it useful as nourishment in our lives and continue to live, I believe Japan's excellent culture as indicated in this book could become food for lives of people in other countries. “Patriotism” means for people to embrace pride in such culture. And each one of us must strive not to lose this kind of national cultural heritage and also to put it to practical use in other countries even in some small way. That is our duty as people of Japan. **JS**

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