The Genealogy of Rationalism in Japan: Focusing on Early Modern Confucianism

By Minamoto Ryoen

The Budding of Rational Thought in the Medieval Period

Japanese rationalism was established when Confucianism became the guiding influence in intellectual life during the Edo period (1603-1867), but rationalist thought itself originated before that. It emerged as early as the period of the Northern and Southern Courts (1336-1392). During the disruptions following the Onin War (1467-1477) when the old order was destroyed, people found themselves in a situation where they had to make decisions for themselves. In the midst of this chaos, the encounter with Western civilization in the 16th century also played a decisive role.

The possessors of rationalist thought were a number of powerful warriors, merchants and religious persons. Warlords and merchants no longer depended on family lineage; they depended on their own abilities, physical strength, mental faculties and personal courage to survive. The priests severed their relations with magical religion, living by the strength of the pureness of their religious faith. Ability, physical strength, mental faculties and bravery did not come to the surface, but became buttresses for a pureness of faith unswerving before any authority. Common to all was a spirit of self-reliance.

For example, Yamana Sozen (also known as Mochitoyo, 1404-1473), one of the great leaders of the Onin War, said that he did not believe in living according to precedent, but rather set new precedents himself. The lords of the warring clans may have employed taboos and superstition as a means to grasp human nature, but were not themselves bound by such observances. Among the military leaders who championed rational thought and action were Takeda Shingen (1521-1573) and Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582). But whereas Shingen placed significance on religious authority and even called himself "Shingen, the abbot of the Tendai Sect," Nobunaga had nothing to do with religions. Instead he dared to call himself the "Devil King of the Sixth Heaven."

A new breed of merchant emerged capable of rational thinking on a scale unseen in later periods. For example, Suminokura Ryoi (1554-1614) developed close relations with the military class and the Hakata merchant Shimai Soshitsu (1539-1615) matched wits with the supreme warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598).

The feud between Nobunaga and Honganji Kennyo (1543-1592) represented a split between politics and religion. During these days even religious organizations came to be permeated with a rationalist spirit. The True Pure Land Sect of Buddhism, established by Shinran (1173-1262) and later re-organized by Rennyo (1415-1499), managed a complete separation from the world of superstition and came to embrace a strong belief absolutely opposed to magic and taboos. As can be seen by the pejorative phrase, "believers are ignorant of the taboos," a rationalist spirit had begun to spread even among the believers of religious groups. Furthermore, the spirit of rationalism together with faith became a spiritual support in the lives of the common people. As the secularization of society became more general, the rationalist mentality that permeated the warlords, rich merchants and even some commoners gradually spread throughout Japanese society in the 16th century. Antagonism between the political and religious realms resulted in the victory of politics. A certain rational spirit came to exist within society that contributed much to the dynamism of Tokugawa society.

Consolidation of Empirical Rationalism and Empirical Science

Confucianism gave intellectual form to the rationalism of Tokugawa society. However, it would be a mistake to think that Confucianism alone became the dominant ideology. In addition to Confucianism, there was Buddhism; in fact, as a social force at the beginning of the Edo period, Buddhism was the more powerful. Nor can one afford to overlook the strength of Shintoism.

While the Tokugawa family was consolidating its rule, a handful of Confucian thinkers began to make efforts to understand the issues of their age. In terms of numbers they were few, but in terms of their ability to provide solutions to the problems of their day, they surpassed the priests, and emerged as the central intellectual force of society. The Edo period represents a shift from Buddhism to Confucianism.

Within Confucianism two general divisions emerged between the Chinese classical studies of the Kiyohara family and followers of the Sung and Ming schools. The latter was further divided into the Chu Hsi school and the Wang Yang-ming school, and various blendings of what can be called Neo-Confucianism. Within these schools, it was above all the Chu Hsi school's concept of *ri* (principle) that championed rational thought. Originally, *ri* (*li* in Chinese) meant the cut of a jewel, but gradually the meaning became abstracted and came to mean order, reason, and the "way" or law. During the Sung Dynasty it became tied together with the concept of heaven, as in the concept of the "principle of heaven" (*tenri*). From that evolved the concept that maintains "principle is one, its manifestations are many." Finally Chu Hsi claimed that all existing things were formed by the relationship between the two principles of *ri* and *ki*

(*qi*, *ch'i*). According to Chinese philosophers, the cosmos is filled with *ki*, that is, a complex of material energy, which constitutes all entities, and at the same time endows the vital force to them. It is akin to the "ether" of ancient Greece. However, it contains a spiritual agency that might be known as "*kozen no ki*" (vital energy) and thus it differs from "matter" in Western philosophy, which is opposed to mind. *Ri* is metaphysical existence as the transcendent ground which makes the existence of all beings possible. But furthermore, it has an aspect of objective law (*butsuri*) that is immanent in existent beings, and at the same time it also has moralistic norms (*dori*) that permeate every human relation. According to Chu Hsi, these two aspects are connected but reason (*dori*) is dominant. However, following Chu Hsi a new issue arose concerning how such a way of thinking was possible.

Rationalist thought in the Edo period developed by not pursuing the interaction between *dori* and *butsuri*. Instead, thinkers such as Kaibara Ekken (1630-1714) made them independent concepts. In contrast, in both China and Korea the connectedness between these two was strictly maintained. Even in Japan, the Kimon school of Yamazaki Ansai (1618-1682) is known for its insistence on the identity of the two principles. This earned them the approbation of other scholars who caustically referred to them as strict "moralists" (*dogakusha*).

With the exception of the Kimon school, Japanese Confucian thinkers were flexible in their acceptance of Chu Hsi thought; they were especially interested in the "principle of things" (*butsuri*) in which they increasingly came to interpret *ri* as experiential and explainable laws that governed the functioning of things in the universe.

On the basis of Chu Hsi teachings, Japanese scholars developed new fields such as the study of medicinal herbs and natural history (Kaibara Ekken), natural philosophy (Miura Baien, 1723-1789), and even allowed for the acceptance of Western studies (Sakuma Shozan, 1811-1864). Also basing themselves on a thoroughly logical point of view, thinkers such as Yamagata Banto (1748-1821) sought to deny the existence of spirits after death (*mukiron*), arguing against the theories of Chu Hsi himself and Arai Hakuseki (1657-1725), who had argued for the existence of sprits (*kishinron*).

As can be seen, the Chu Hsi school in Japan was truly diverse. True enough, there were empirical rationalist tendencies in Chu Hsi thought in China (Lo Ch'in-shun [1465-1547], for example) and in Korea (Yi T'oegye [1501-1570], and scholars associated with the so-called Northern School of Learning), but they were decidedly in the minority. In both China and Korea, Neo-Confucianism became a formal subject in the traditional Chinese higher civil-service examinations and, as such, became a mere subject of study. As a result, Chu Hsi thought, especially in China, lost its vitality as it came to be based on textual criticism and established views, diverging from Chu Hsi's original emphasis on understanding and indeed inducing change. In the Ming and Qing eras, Chu Hsi's new Confucianism became an intellectual tool for preserving the contemporary order. In contrast, orthodox Chu Hsi thought maintained considerable vitality in Korea and in the Kimon school in Japan. Nonetheless, with the exception of certain periods, Chu Hsi propensities toward empirical rationalism did not fully develop in China and Korea. The fact that in Japan there was no system of civil-service examinations had, ironically, a positive result.

Photo : Ogyu Keiichi

Ogyu Sorai developed a political ideology which aimed at "governing the country and giving peace to the people" (chikoku anmin)

The Sorai School and the Two Approaches to the Understanding of Principle

Thinkers like Ogyu Sorai (1666-1728) were unique to Japan. The Sorai school was a political ideology which aimed at "governing the country and giving peace to the people" (*chikoku anmin*); it was, in fact, an ideology of social control. According to Sorai, the "Way" was the "ways of rites and music," and was given concrete form as a system. People living under this system would unconsciously be influenced by it. Sorai rejected Chu Hsi's insistence on teaching "self discipline" to the people and on efforts to investigate the truth that exists in all things. Instead Sorai believed that there was no other way than to rely on a system of rites and music as a means to influence the behavior of people. He attempted to create a school of thought that fundamentally denied the teachings of Chu Hsi.

Regarding *ri* or principle, Sorai held that the whole debate over *ri* and *ki* was a waste of time. What Chu Hsi called "principle" (*ri*) was subjective and thus unable to provide any objective standard for judging things. In *Benmei* (Distinguishing Names) he criticized *ri* as indefinite. He further claimed that Chu Hsi scholars were only interested in the *ri* of this and that, and lacked a systemized framework of knowledge. Sorai judged this to be their major mistake: their "investigation of things" (*kyuri*) would end by denying the existence of heaven (*ten*), spirits (*kishin*), and even the existence of the sages

Photo : Fukui City History Museum

Yokoi Shonan believed in the existence of a universal truth (tenchi kokyo no jitsuri) as a "principle"

(*seijin*) themselves. On the other hand, in one of his works on military affairs, *Kenroku Gaisho*, Sorai expounded on the "principle of war" (*gunri*), explaining that it was the basic concept underlying military science.

From these two ideas came the positivism of Yoshimasu Todo (1702-1773), a physician of the classical school who denied the value of the exhaustive investigation of things (*kyuri*), and Sugita Genpaku (1733-1817), who responded to the investigation of principles via Western medicine. The former held that it was meaningless to pursue the relationship between cause and effect, while the latter claimed that it was precisely the examination of cause and effect that made Western medicine superior as a science.

What becomes problematic here is the thought of Sorai, who proposed these two different ways of thinking. How is one supposed to interpret an individual who says in one place that there is no objective standard and in another that there are objective laws? In my understanding, Sorai's remark that *ri* lacks any objective standard was based on his criticism of the proponents of Chu Hsi who were merely speculating. Here he had in mind Sato Naokata (1650-1719) of the Kimon school and the physicians who explained the causes of disease according to yin-yang imbalances. However, when one looks honestly at actual affairs, Sorai was unable to completely deny the existence of principle. Hence, Sorai wrote in *Bendo* (A Discourse on the Way):

"I do not wish scholars to disregard the theories of Sung Confucianism and other later schools by uncritically accepting what I have to say. There is a vast expanse of time between the ancients and us. Portions of the Six Classics have been lost over time, so that it is perhaps unavoidable that one should come to use the abstract concept of 'principle' to speculate on the meaning of these Classics. The Sung scholars were the first to employ this concept: a concept which unfortunately lacked precision. Even less fortunate is the fact that they became captives of the abstract idea itself and could not go beyond it. If the scholars of Sung Confucianism and other schools had been more exact and meticulous in their method of study, they would not have committed so many errors." [1]

From this we clearly see that Sorai's true intention was to recognize the significance of the concept of principle but assert that proper means were necessary when dealing with it.

However, Sorai's acknowledged "principle" was not identical with that propounded by the Neo-Confucianists. The first distinction was that the "investigation of things" (*kyuri*) demanded by the Chu Hsi school included not only human beings and their society but also natural phenomena; Sorai's view limited it to humans and their society. The second distinction is that Neo-Confucian scholars conceived of principle as including the world of experience and the world of transcendental values, Sorai himself limited it to the world of actual facts that we can experience (including the world of "words" of the ancient texts). These aspects clearly indicate characteristics particular to Sorai's scholarship. Through him, Confucian thinkers of the Edo period moved from Chu Hsi philosophy to political science and from general ethics to philology. Accompanying this was the foundation of a new scholarship, but one must not overlook the fact that an important element was thereby removed. It is interesting to see how the concept of principle within the Sorai school developed. It need at least be mentioned that Sorai's conception of principle was fundamentally accepted and this concept applied far and wide to political and economic phenomena by creative thinkers such as Kaiho Seiryo (1755-1817).

Transcendental Rationalism and Universality

So far I have largely summarized the argument found in my *Tokugawa Gori Shiso no Keifu* (The Genealogy of Rationalist Thought in the Edo period) published by Chuo Koron Shinsha in 1972. In that volume, however, I did not include a section on the development of transcendental rationalism. Differing from Sorai's view, this encompasses society, the nation and indeed the entire world from the viewpoint of idealism.

During World War II, while I loved the nation of my birth, when I tried to discover some idea of force in Japanese history that transcended the concept of national superiority, about the only figure I could come up with was Prince Shotoku and his emphasis on harmony. After the war I began studying the intellectual history of the late Edo period and was stunned when I discovered the following passage in the writings of Yokoi Shonan (1809-1869).

"The Japanese spirit is untutored and unsystematic and therefore for us to criticize foreigners as barbarians ignorant of the way is surely a great mistake. This will only make us enemies. Heaven and earth is broad and the brightness of the sun and moon can be seen everywhere. Ah! How sad it is to see such narrow-minded thinking at work; it will surely lead our country astray." [2]

Sure enough, there had been someone who had thought this way. Elated, I continued to read Yokoi's writings and came across the following:

"How is it that our country's policy is to deal with foreigners as barbarians? Instead we should have relations with countries that know the way and avoid contact with countries that are ignorant of the way. For us to reject relations without reference to whether or not a country follows the way is proof that we ourselves are ignorant of universal principles. In the end, we will lose the trust of other countries in the world." [3]

Indicated here is the belief in the existence of a universal truth (*tenchi kokyo no jitsuri*). This too is a "principle." How does this differ from the "principle" of empirical rationalism? At the time I was unable to see the historical development of this moralistic "principle." In 1967 I was teaching a course on the history of Japanese thought at Columbia University. One day I was reading from a source book on Japanese history, the famous *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, when I was surprised to find a translation of the so-called "Ship's Oath" by Fujiwara Seika (1561-1619) and a letter written by Seika on behalf of his disciple Yoshida Soan (1571-1632, the eldest son of Suminokura Ryoi) to the Prince of Annam (now Vietnam). The following is a portion of his letter to the prince:

"We too hold to the belief that good faith is inherent in our nature, that it moves heaven and earth, penetrates metals and rocks, and pervades everything without exceptions; its influence is not just limited to contact and communication between neighboring countries. Customs may differ in countries a thousand miles apart, but as to good faith every quarter in the world must be the same, for this is the very nature of things.

It will be seen therefore that men differ only in secondary details, such as clothing and speech. Countries may be a thousand or even ten thousand miles apart and differences may be found in clothing and speech, but there is one thing in all countries which is not far apart, not a bit different: that is the singularity of good faith." [4]

Further, the "Ship's Oath" contained the following passage:

"Foreign lands may different from our own in manners and speech, but as to principle (ri) bestowed upon men by heaven there cannot be any difference." [5]

The basis for making mutual "conviction" possible is "principles bestowed by heaven." At the time Annam was also, like Japan, a country governed by Confucian teachings. Among those in Japan who followed Confucianism, the establishment of a psychological bond relying upon "principles bestowed by heaven" was clearly possible. When I first read those words of Seika in New York, I was absolutely shaken.

Let us return to the subject at hand. In 1603 at their first meeting, Seika said the following to Hayashi Razan (1683-1657):

"The existence of ri (principle) is as evident as the fact that heaven is above us and earth below. It is something which is naturally self-evident. In Japan this is true and in Korea, in Annam and in China as well... Even in the lands over the Eastern sea and in the lands over the Western sea, people communicate with each other; ri is the same everywhere. To the north and to the south this is also true. Is this not something which is supremely public and clear? If someone were to doubt this I would have no trust in him at all." [6]

In this passage, reference to Japan, Korea, Annam and China" obviously refers to an East Asia in which Confucianism was the dominant ideology. But the passage continues to note that *ri* also held sway in lands over the seas to the East and to the West. The same holds true of lands to the North and South. Fujiwara Seika is therefore confident of the universality of *ri*. In his mind, *ri* extends beyond the bounds of Confucian regions becoming a global principle.

Photo : The Mainichi Newspapers

Fujiwara Seika was confident of the universality of ri which extends beyond the bounds of Confucian regions

On what basis is this creed supported? Seika claimed that the "way of heaven" (*tendo*) constitutes *ri* or principle. The universality of *ri* is thereby guaranteed by being rooted in the "way of heaven." It becomes a sort of cosmic truth. According to Seika, *tendo* (the way of heaven) and *ri* (principle) are one and the same. Then, how about heaven and humanity? Again Seika answers that fundamentally they are the same, but proper cultivation of the relationship is necessary. Seika sought to formulate an intellectual system that would guarantee the unification of "heaven" and "humanity" though the working of a universal "principle."

Seika's idealism, however, was not divorced from reality. As the quote below from the "Ship's Oath" demonstrates, he was able to combine an appreciation of the universal truth of "principle" with positive encouragement for commerce.

"Commerce is the business of selling and buying in order to bring profit to both parties. It is not to gain profit at the expense of others. When profit is shared

the gain may be large but the benefits are small. When profit is not small, the gain may be small, but the benefits are large. Profit is the happy outcome of righteousness." [7] Commerce and trade are acts that benefit both parties. And "profit" is seen as the "happy outcome" of the proper action of "righteousness" (*gi*). Seika was thus able to provide an economic rationale for trade.

Let us return again to Shonan. What exactly is it that distinguishes Shonan's understanding of "principle?" His usage of terms such as "universality" and "public" provides some hints to answer this question. In several of his writings, Shonan refers to "public heavenly principles" (*kokyo no tenri*), "supremely open and impartial and grand heavenly principles" (*shiko shihei shidai no tenri*) and "public practical principles known throughout heaven and earth" (*tenchi kokyo no jitsuri*). Seika also referred to the idea of public (*ko*) and qualified *ri* as something that was "supremely public, grand and clear" (*shiko shidai shimei*). The idea of the universality of *ri* is something Shonan derived from Seika; he used this idea to develop a new "public" philosophy. And again the concept of "public" is important as a foundation for commercial activity. In this regard, the following quotations from the writings of Yokoi Shonan are worth noting.

(A) If overseas countries demand that Japan open its ports, basing themselves on the public way (kokyo no michi), who would not call Japan a fool for persisting in its old seclusionist views, for ruling for the benefit of private interests, and for not knowing the principles of commercial intercourse? [8]

(B) Since the forces of heaven and earth, and the situations of the various countries cannot be controlled by human actions, for Japan alone to remain isolated is naturally improper. Even if commerce should be begun while retaining a seclusionist outlook, there will arise many problems connected to either opening the country or keeping it closed and Japan's long-term security will be difficult to attain. However, if we work in harmony with the forces of heaven and earth and follow the practices of the various nations and if we administer the land in accordance with the public way (kokyo no michi), all hindrances will disappear and the anxieties of present-day will no longer exist. [9]

In the first passage (A) Shonan refers to "principles of commercial intercourse." Here the concept of principle (*ri*) is able to incorporate commerce in Shonan's thinking, but several problems remain. That is, commercial intercourse is recognized, but there lies submerged a certain temperament of desiring to expel foreigners (*joi*) which would, in the course of events, overcome others and seek to become the supreme ruler of the world. In order to make sure that seclusionist views are overcome, Shonan asserts in the second passage (B) that the true opening of the country must be in accordance with the public way (*kokyo no michi*). Living in an age of nationalism, Shonan had to make doubly sure that his meaning was clear.

Conclusion

What about the modern era and contemporary Japan? At the beginning of the Meiji period (1868-1912), Nishi Amane (1829-1897) made it clear that the two notions of principle, the experiential-empirical and the moralistic-subjective, so long debated in the Edo period, were completely different in nature. The relationship between the two was settled. From that point on, the experiential-empirical "principle," taking on various forms in modern science and scholarship, became the driving force behind Japan's modernization. On the other hand, the moralistic-subjective "principle" managed to retain strength until the 1880s but thereafter waned in its influence over Japanese political and social life. It was at this time that an emperor system evolved from being a mere political institution into a sort of value system that held sway over the thought and behavior of all Japanese subjects. The second genealogy of thought that began with Seika and Shonan remains, even today long after the end of the emperor system, in need of revitalization. Moreover, the construction of a desirable relationship between the two *ri*, the empirical and the moralistic, remains a major issue in intellectual debate. JJTI

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Note: In this article, translations of Yokoi's "Kokuze Sanron" are quoted from "Kokuze Sanron: The Three Major Problems of State Policy," translated by D. Y. Miyauchi, in *Monumenta Nipponica* XXXIII 1-2

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