

“Japanese-ness” in Philosophy?

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Introduction

In recent days, when referring “Japanese Philosophy” or “Japanese-ness” in philosophy, we are more and more urged to add a question mark after these problematic words. That is because an increasing number of scholars, regardless of domestic or foreign, put more effort on questioning the very existence of Japanese-ness or Japanese philosophy than on examining their contents. As we will see later, it is true that such change of the research trend has enough legitimacy. Nonetheless, do we have no choice but abandon these problematic concepts thoroughly or devote ourselves into the endless deconstruction of Japanese-ness? In this article, focusing on the traditional attitude for Buddhist or Confucianist scriptures, I will attempt to extract another fruitful, at least promising, possibility of Japanese-ness.

1. Philosophical Heritage in the Modern Period

As is often the case with discussing any non-Western intellectual traditions, it is necessary also in Japan to once examine the gap and continuity between pre-modern intellectual heritage and westernized philosophical discourses in modernity, before dealing with the Japanese-ness which is deemed to run through the pre-modern and modern periods. In other words, before going further, here we have to briefly overview how, and to what extent, these Japanese intellectual heritage has determined the modern philosophy of Japan.

As to this issue, two aspects are frequently pointed out; the positive adoption of Eastern philosophy to overcome Western philosophy, and the continuation of the tradition of seminars.

First, let us consider the former aspect. The modern philosophy of Japan was led by two parallel agendas. One is the careful, or faithful, translation and transplantation of modern Western philosophy, such as that of Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer. The other agenda is various attempts to overcome “Western dualism,” especially invoking or recalling “Eastern philosophy.” Inoue Tetsujirō (1856–1944), the first Japanese chief professor of the department of philosophy in the Tokyo Imperial University, embodied both agendas. On one hand, he introduced German idealism to Japanese academic study. On the other hand, he reconstructed Mahayana Buddhism as an “Eastern Philosophy” and aimed to overcome the Western philosophy of his time. Modern Japanese, including Inoue, tended to understand Western philosophy as dualism, —that of subject/object, human/nature, individuality/society, mind/body, and so on. By contrast, Eastern premodern thoughts, such as Confucianism and Buddhism, were thought to integrate or unite such mutually opposing elements. Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), the most influential modern Japanese philosopher, was not an exception

of this tendency. He shared these attitudes with Inoue and other modern Japanese².

The latter, another heritage of premodern intellectual tradition, is that of seminars, or *kai-doku* in Japanese. Maeda Tsutomu, a researcher of Japanese early-modern thought, once pointed out in his influential book, *Seminars in the Edo Period* (2012), that the early modern intellectual sphere of Japan had a tradition of the precise reading of Confucian scriptures and free arguments about them where the social positions of their participants are purposely neglected and thus equality is guaranteed in their space of speech, especially in the *samurai* schools³. According to him, such seminars didn't disappear at all even in the modern period. Rather, it served modern Japanese as an attitude of open discussion, which was absolutely necessary for the modernization. In response to Maeda's assertion, Nakano Hiroataka goes further to point out that this tradition was taken over by the seminars in the department of philosophy in modern universities⁴; it may be possible to say that modern Japanese are reading *Critique of Pure Reason* by Immanuel Kant just in the same way as their ancestors read *Analects of Confucius*.

2. Empire of Canons: Intellectual Tradition of Premodern Japan

It is not only the modernization of Japanese intellectual world but also its premodern tradition itself that has numerous twists and turns in its progress. That is mostly because, just as almost all East Asian cultures, it had not developed by itself but had been deeply influenced by China. In this regard, Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801), the most representative *kokugaku*⁵ scholar, accurately expresses the disposition of Japanese thought. He laments that “generally speaking, from long ago, when the Japanese say only ‘learning’, it means Chinese learning.”⁶ Chinese learning had monopolized the intellectual market of Norinaga's time and thus “learning” exclusively meant Chinese one, since his contemporary intellectuals concentrated their scholarly efforts on Chinese texts rather than Japanese ones. It may be the case even now, because, when we Japanese refer to “philosophy”, we normally and exclusively mean Western philosophy. Such euro-centric or self-colonized attitude may seem

² Cf. Watanabe Kiyoshi, “The Truth of ‘Nishida Philosophy’”[‘Nishida Tetsugaku’ no Shinkei], *Philosophy of Japan*[*Nihon no Tetsugaku*] Vol. 8, 2007, and Inoue Katsuhito, *Nishida Kitarō and the Spirit of Meiji* [*Nishida Kitarō to Meiji no Seishin*], Ōsaka: Kansai University Press, 2011.

³ Maeda Tsutomu, *Seminars in the Edo period: a History of Kaidoku* [*Edo no Dokushokai: Kaidoku no Shisō-shi*], Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, Heibon-sha, 2012.

⁴ Nakano Hiroataka, “Toward a Redefinition of Japanese Philosophy”, *Tetsugaku* Vol. 3, 2019, p. 60.

⁵ This Japanese word is usually translated as “nativism” or “national learning.” This school tried to discover Japanese “indigenous” philosophical, religious, and ethical thought in ancient myths, poetry, and ritual texts, as opposed to Japan's long-lasting tradition of intellectual dependence on China. Needless to say, we can ask whether it is possible to distinguish such Japanese “indigenous” aspects, that is, “Japanese-ness,” from this country's culture that has been deeply influenced by the neighbor continent.

⁶ *Uiyamabumi* [*First Step into Mountains*], *Collected Works of Motoori Norinaga* [*Motoori Norinaga Zenshū*], Vol. 1, Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, 1968. p.7.

somewhat odd for some foreigners⁷. Regardless of whether we share Norinaga's nationalistic lament or not, it is true that the Japanese intellectual history mainly consists of Buddhism and Confucianism imported from China via Korea. Therefore, most scholarly works by Japanese have been faithful interpretations and commentaries on Buddhist and Confucian canons written in Chinese characters. Japanese indigenous texts, such as myths, narratives, and poems, typically ranked lower in the Japanese hierarchy of scholarship. It may be no exaggeration to say that, from the distant past and even to the present, we Japanese have been living in an empire of imported canons.

Here one possible question will arise: Can we trace "indigenous" oral traditions and philosophical thoughts that can be clearly distinguished from Chinese thoughts? This is the very question that led to *kokugaku* in the 18th century. *Kokugaku* scholars, such as

Kamo no Mabuchi (1697-1769) and the aforementioned Motoori Norinaga, eagerly searched for such Japanese-ness, especially in the ancient myths, which were collected in *Kojiki* [*the Ancient Record*] (712) and *Nihon-shoki* [*the Chronicle of Japan*](720), two dynastic chronicles written in the 8th century. Katada Takeshi compares them to the Grimm brothers in Germany, who tried to discover *das Germanische*, or "German-ness", in German oral traditions⁸. It may have some legitimacy that *kokugaku* in the 18th-century Japan can be compared, to an extent, to *Germanistik* in the 19th-century Germany.

3. Does "Japanese-ness" Really Exist?

However, can such Japanese-ness be found? Today, most researchers would say no. This is mainly because ancient myths and *Shinto*, the Japanese "native" religion based on these myths, may be influenced by Chinese thought so fundamentally that we are not able to extract the "pure" Japanese-ness from them. At least one of the primary sources of ancient myth, *Nihon-shoki*, obviously adopted the Ying-Yang theory in its essential structure⁹ and even borrowed some expressions from imported Buddhist scriptures¹⁰. As a matter of fact, the *kokugaku* scholars were not able to logically illustrate such Japanese-ness; instead, they claimed that Japanese-ness exists customarily and not literally.

Then, we would naturally arrive at one radical, or critical, question: should that premodern heritage be regarded as *Japanese* one? Maruyama Masao (1914-1996), one of the most influential post-war scholars, once noted "the absence of the reference axis of thought"¹¹ in Japanese intellectual history,

⁷ Cf. B. T. Davis, "What is Japanese Philosophy", *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy*, Oxford UP, 2021, pp. 10-12, and H. G. Blocker and Ch. L. Starling, *Japanese Philosophy*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001, p. 3.

⁸ Katada Takeshi, "Motoori Norinaga and Jakob Grimm", *The Bulletin of the Society of Meiji Japan* [*Meiji Seitoku Kinen Gakkai Kiyō*]49, 2012.

⁹ Kōnoshi Takamitsu, *The World View of Kojiki* [*Kojiki no Sekai-kan*], Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2008, pp. 34-37.

¹⁰ Kojima Noriyuki, *Japanese Ancient Literature and Chinese Literature* [*Jōdai Nihon Bungaku to Chūgoku Bungaku*] Vol. 1, Tokyo: Hanawa Shobo, 1962, pp. 368-374.

¹¹ "Thought of Japan [Nihon no Shisō]", *Selected Works of Maruyama Masao* [*Maruyama Masao*

when compared with obvious axes in other cultures, such as Christianity in Europe and Confucianism in China.

Therefore, an extremist would be able to insist as follows: Japanese premodern intellectual history should be “cut into round slices”—to put it another way, it should be divided into separate peripheral developments of Confucianism and Buddhism. Thus we should not try to find a specific feature common to such various intellectual trends. Why do we try to find a single and perpetual Japanese-ness between a 12th-century zen priest and a 18th-century Confucian philologist, just in the same way as trying to find one Turkish-ness shared by both Thales of Miletus and Atatürk?

If that were the case, Japanese-ness would have become a useless and inherently leer concept and thus we could deal with the intellectual heritage of this archipelago without this troublesome concept. Indeed, most recent researchers, especially those in the younger generations, whether domestic or foreign, come to share this attitude toward Japanese-ness.

4. Japanese-ness is not Innocent

Why are recent researchers so resistant, or cold-hearted to this Japanese-ness? This is partly because Japanese-ness is not innocent at all. Especially during the militaristic era of World War II, many Japanese promoted such Japanese-ness, most of which was filled with the egoless loyalty to the emperor and the empire. It was all the easier for them to forge Japanese-ness arbitrarily and politically because, as we have already seen, the originality of Japanese thought is quite difficult to detect amid the vast quantity of Chinese-influenced intellectual teachings. Maruyama himself tried to discover “basso ostinato”, or obstinate bass of Japanese intellectual tradition into the ancient myths again in the post-war period¹² and was severely criticized by his contemporaries for reviving wartime ideology¹³, although his intention was to thoroughly deconstruct such Japanese-ness.

5. Against Philosophicalization: Ogyū Sorai

Then, should we abandon this problematic concept? Most would agree that we should. Nonetheless, there may be room for being able to find Japanese-ness from an angle completely different than ever.

From my point of view, there is a tradition of “anti-philosophical” tendencies in premodern Japan. One of its representatives is Ogyū Sorai (1666-1728), the most famous and influential Confucian of the 18th century. He insists, “The investigation of principle inevitably results in the abolition of the Sages.”¹⁴ The investigation of principle (kyū-ri) is the slogan of the Zhu Xi school of neo-

Shū] Vol. 7, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1996, p. 193.

¹² “Rekishī Ishiki no Koso [the Old Layer of Historical Consciousness]”, *Selected Works of Maruyama Masao* [*Maruyama Masao Shū*], Vol. 10, 1996, p. 7.

¹³ See Yoshida Kazutoshi, *Maruyama Masao and the Postwar Thought* [*Maruyama Masao to Sengo Shisō*], Tokyo: Ōtsuki Shoten, 2013, pp. 195-197.

¹⁴ *Ogyū Sorai (A collection of philosophical thoughts in Japan* [*Nihon Shisō Taikei*] 36), Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1973, p. 152.

Confucianism, which was the most powerful Confucian sect about from the 14th to 19th century in the whole Eastern Asia, including China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. In the late 19th century, faced with Western modernity, many Asian intellectuals regarded this school as nearest to Western modern philosophy among all the Eastern intellectual teachings, since this school shows little tendency toward religious beliefs and attempts to find a universal principle of the world, based on each person's innate reason. Nonetheless, Sorai criticized this "philosophical" attitude for the abolition of the Sages. Sorai, the representative intellectual of the 18th-century Japan, clearly opposed the philosophicalization of Confucianism.

6. "Anti-philosophical" Tendency in Japan

Generally speaking, it can be said that long-lasting religions or intellectual teachings tend to develop as follows: At their forming period of church and dogmas, their originators, such as Christ, Buddha, and the Confucian Sages, are religiously worshipped as absolute Others who have little in common with us ordinary people. At the same time, the records of their direct narratives are collected and respected as canons. However, as time passes by and the interpretation of such canons becomes more precise, these ancient beliefs are philosophicalized. One universal principle which runs through the originators, canons, and us is discovered in the development of theology. This discovery inevitably nullifies the authority of the originators, because the same principle is now shared by both sages and us. Such a process is shared not only by Jewish, Christian, and Islamic theologies, but also by Eastern Asian Buddhism and Confucianism.

Needless to say, Japan has also experienced such philosophicalization of Buddhism and Confucianism. Not only does the Zhu Xi school illustrate its good example, but buddhas and Shinto deities had been deemed to exist within our hearts, or moreover, considered identical with our hearts also in the developments of their theologies. However, we can witness a large number of claims against such "philosophical" tendencies in Japanese intellectual history. There is little space for naming all of them, but at the very least, the aforementioned Ogyū Sorai and Motoori Norinaga both showed this "anti-philosophical" tendency, especially opposing to the Zhu Xi school. Moreover, two representatives of medieval Buddhism, Dōgen and Shinran, both attempted to overcome their contemporary philosophical Buddhist trends, using their respective strategies: Dōgen severely criticized his contemporary Buddhist trend which deemed the individual's heart as an absolute entity¹⁵, whereas Shinran summarized the numerous teachings of Mahayana Buddhism as a quite simple motif of "the power of the Other" [*tarikī*]. It is possible to regard these anti-philosophical trend as a feature of Japanese intellectual tradition. In addition, I cannot find any meaningful reason for hesitating to

¹⁵ *Shōbō Genzō* [*The True Dharma-Eye of Treasury*], the Volume of *Busshō* [The Buddha Nature], *Dōgen* (A collection of philosophical thoughts in Japan [*Nihon Shisō Taikei*] 12) Vol. 1, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1970, p. 46.

name it as “Japanese-ness”. In other words, it can be said that the Japanese tend to deny the philosophicalization of any religion or teachings.

Conclusion

As we have overviewed, though our research was forced to remain quite rough, it is right to say that there is plenty of difficulty in asserting the pure, single, and historically unchanging Japanese-ness nowadays. There is, however, some room for re-imaging Japanese-ness in a way quite different than ever: we can witness a peculiar tendency of Japanese to put emphasis on the otherness and thus to show some hesitation, if not a total denial, against philosophicalization of any intellectual discourses. Indeed, we can point out that the learning of ancient documents of the Qing dynasty shared the same hesitation or denial, but comparative studies may be the task of another article.