

The Consumption in Monetary Economy and the Confucian “Way (道)”

—From OGYU Sorai’s Viewpoint—

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【要旨】 貨幣経済における消費と儒教の「道」；荻生徂徠の視点から

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本稿は、近世日本において活躍した儒者・荻生徂徠（1666-1728）の立場から社会における消費活動、特に貨幣による物の消費および労働力の消費について論じる。儒学者という立場から政治を論じることに熱心であった徂徠が、江戸に見た克服すべき課題が、巨大な消費都市としての江戸の姿と、そこで生活する人々の困窮であった。徂徠が見た江戸は、貨幣経済の活発化により、金さえあれば何でも手に入るという社会の仕組みに支配されているという様相を呈していた。それによって変容しつつある社会全体の「風俗」に、徂徠は「困窮」の原因を見る。すなわち、貨幣経済の活発化は人々に多大な利便性をもたらしたが、それが逆に自然資源の有限性に対する無頓着（「奢」）を誘発し、長期的な視野を失ってあらゆることをその場しのぎに金で処断していこうとする狭量な人間性を育て（「せわしなき風俗」）、人々を結びつけていた「恩義」や「信」を希薄なものにしたと捉え、これが生活の困窮の根本的な原因であると考えたのである。このように分析する徂徠の目指す社会とは、個々人がそれぞれに特有の長所でもって関わり合い助け合う共同体的社会である。そしてそこでは、便利のために物や労働力を消費するよりも、共同体を構成する人々を養い、育てることが主眼とされる。このような徂徠の社会観を通して、儒教の「道」における「消費」の意味を考察する。

In this paper, I will discuss the idea of consumption in society seen from the viewpoint of OGYU Sorai (1666-1728). OGYU Sorai was a Confucian scholar of early modern Japan (middle of the Edo period). He was also a political thinker who had been employed by TOKUGAWA shogunate’s political adviser YANAGISAWA Yoshiyasu, and had close relationship with Tsunayoshi (5th Shogun) and Yoshimune (8th Shogun). He thus discussed political issues as well. Confucianism generally considers an individual’s moral self-improvement or training to be very important as a way to become a “sage (聖人 *seijin*)”, and expects that a harmonious society will obtain as the result of everyone’s moral self-improvement. But Sorai refuses this idea (in particular, that of Zhu Xi school), and says “the Way is a means of governing the provinces and the realm” (*Sorai Sennsei Tomonsho*, in *SZ*, p469ⁱ). He emphasizes the importance of the political governance applying ancient Chinese laws written in the Chinese classics (六経) which are stressed in Confucianism.

With this concern in mind, when Sorai looked at the social situation in the city of Edo (now called Tokyo), he

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could not help seeing a giant consumption machinery in Edo and noticing many impoverished people there. I’ll describe in detail later the situation in Edo as Sorai saw, but, briefly, he was thinking that the cause for these situations was the overflow of commercial products and the rising of monetary economy (money-based economy). He did not deny economic consumption and development downrightly, but he believed that the loss of humanity in their monetary economy and their unrestricted use of the limited amount of resources were the cause of people’s poverty. In this paper, I will look at Sorai’s view of social life, and thereby argue about “consumption,” “distribution of products/ goods” and “human labor,” some specific and important expressions of human’s relations.

1. Monetary economy and commercial prosperity in Edo

About the city of Edo in early modern Japan (around 1700), Sorai described it as follows:

Concerning the present city of Edo, the fundamental problem is that Edo is getting overpopulated. Many feudal lords or *daimyos* (大名) and many *hatamotos* (旗本) are staying in the areas around the Edo Castle, and all of them live in so-called inn’s area (旅宿の境界 *ryoshuku no kyogai*). Those who stay there cannot live without money; they need much money. During the past century, everything in the society could not go without money (*Taiheisaku*, in *ST*, p475ⁱⁱ).

The city of Edo Sorai saw was filled with *bushis* (武士) who led a life like travelers. Since the age of provincial wars, each domain (藩 *han*) had an area called a castle town (城下町 *kyōka machi*) which served as an administrative and commercial center, and many residents gathered there. In addition, due to the system called *sankinkoutai* (参勤交代), the *daimyo* (大名) of each domain had the duty to come up to the city of Edo. *Sankinkoutai* (参勤交代) was a system that ordered *daimyos* to live in Edo every other year, so many *daimyos* were constantly in and out the city of Edo.

In addition, during their stay in Edo *daimyos* had a life-style in which they had to depend completely on money as they purchased daily necessities. Sorai saw this situation and said “they depend on money to get everything, from food, clothing and shelter to chopsticks” (*Seidan*, in *ST*, p295). Originally, *daimyos* lived on the rice offered every year as the land tax imposed on their people in their domain. But in order to live in Edo, they had to exchange the rice with cash. Thus, once *bushis* left their own domain, they became mere consumers, and lived following Edo’s monetary economyⁱⁱⁱ. Sorai described the *daimyos* who were obliged to live under this circumstance as “those who live in so-called inn’s area (旅宿の境界),” and thought it was such circumstance that led *bushis* to fall into poverty.

Bushis were not the only people “who live in so-called inn’s area.” During that time, in Edo there lived also many hawkers (棒手振 *botefuri*), daily employees (日雇者 *hiyomono*), and short-term contract apprentices (出替奉公人 *dekawari-hokonin*). Many hawkers brought diverse merchandises or products to the city of Edo because there was high demand by *daimyos* and the production of goods had been improved due to the development of farming implements and cultivation methods. Thanks to their activities, the life as consumers in Edo improved greatly. And *daimyos* could get, with their money, not just daily necessities but also working force if necessary. It were many daily employees (日雇者) and short-term contract apprentices (出替奉公人) that met *daimyos*’ demand. *Daimyos*

used to employ vassals called *fudai* (譜代) for generations, but during that time, according to Sorai's description, *daimyos* preferred not to take care of a vassal for a long time, as they could not stretch their budget for the personnel cost, so they rather chose to employ day labor force, that is daily employees, or short-term contract apprentices (出替奉公人).^{iv}

In this way, the city of Edo came to be a system in which they just needed money to resolve any problem; the city became a system where it was impossible to live without money. Sorai deplored "Merchants in the castle town do their job much more actively making it quite easy for us to obtain numerous goods, and the price of commodities go higher, making many *bushis* very poor. Now that things have become like this, we have no way to help them" (*Seidan*, in *ST*, p296). According to Sorai, the society started to take on an aspect expressed by such phrases as, "waste (奢 *sha*)" and "hurry-up manners (せわしなき風俗 *sewashinaki fuzoku*)," and began to show a radical and fundamental break down of the city of Edo.

2. "Waste (奢)" and "hurry-up manners (せわしなき風俗)"

Sorai wrote, about the city of Edo in the middle of the Edo period (Genroku Era), that the society was far more convenient to live in, in the sense that it had become easier to purchase with money anything, from daily necessities to work force. But he also pointed out that this convenience had changed human beings into rather narrow-minded creatures.

Sorai wrote that "due to the freedom and the convenience, if they have money, they have no problem coping with any urgent necessity. ...They are apt to cope with every single problem immediately at the expense of high cost. This habit has become *Bushis'* life-style" (*Seidan*, in *ST*, pp308-309). So "anything and everything are in a hurry" (*Seidan*, in *ST*, p308). Sorai described this life-style as in "hurry-up manners." What was brought in by the monetary economy was the convenience with which they could easily fulfill their selfish desires and the groups of *bushis* who were fooled by the situation. If they had money, they could get whatever goods and labor force they wanted, because they were in the "free and convenient" society; they could cope with any problems immediately, that is, with money. As Sorai noted, resolving anything at once with money was considered to be "clever," and this whole circumstances changed people's way of life to what was described as "hurry-up manners."

The idea of material affluence in Edo, according to which any problem could be resolved with money, led *bushis* to form habits of laziness which Sorai expressed as "having no contemplation and readiness to anything" (*Seidan*, in *ST*, p309). For example, *daimyos* were expected to save their annual rice tax they had collected in their domain for three years for fear of emergency (famine, military service and so on), but there were many *daimyos* who cashed all the annual tribute they had gotten for the sake of their own living in Edo^v. So Sorai severely criticized the social trend that encouraged people just to believe that they were behaving cleverly by resolving all the problems at once with money, calling it "hurry-up manners." And he was deeply concerned about that circumstances that had made those people who chose to accommodate themselves easily to others' opinions and showed no readiness to prepare for the future.

Furthermore, as this "freedom and convenience" in Edo helped distribute goods and products, and made the whole society affluent in materials, Sorai criticized this affluence as "waste (奢 *sha*)." Sorai did not just look at the wealthy

and luxurious life of a limited number of people, when criticizing it as “waste.”

Sorai saw the society’s affluence and convenience as “waste (奢),” because he thought “natural resources have their limit” (*Seidan*, in *ST*, p313). Sorai’s vision of the universe is based on his belief that the universe is substantially perfect (as he wrote, “the ancient universe had no lack, so foods, clothing and shelter were sufficient. And the present universe, which came out of the ancient one, have no lack either” *Seidan*, in *ST*, p377). Therefore, if we were in poverty, that would be because we have problems in allocating our limited resources fairly and correctly. Given this understanding, Sorai thought that we had to practice “thrift (儉 ken)” — to be more specific, we had to create administrative institutions which would control the distribution of materials or products^{vi}. He proposed that they prevent poverty by limiting the use of products according to their social class and thereby controlling the material distribution for fear that only the rich could have a monopoly on products.

3. To get bushis settled in their own lands and establish an institution of courtesy

Given the understanding of the social situations, Sorai concluded that “the reason that people are in poverty is to live in so-called inn’s area (旅宿の境界), in hurry-up manners (せわしなき風俗) and based on no administrative institution” (*Seidan*, in *ST*, p317). To resolve this problem, Sorai, as a Confucian scholar, proposed to get *bushis* settled in their own domain and establish an institution of courtesy.

When ancient sages established laws, they emphasized to get all the people, both higher-ranking and lower-ranking people, settled in their lands and then establish an institution of courtesy. This is the most important thing to govern people. Today, we lack these two viewpoints, hence all the people become poorer and various crimes are committed (*Seidan*, in *ST*, p305).

The settlement of *bushis* and their people in their lands was proposed as the way to correct their “way to live in inn’s area (旅宿の境界)” and their “hurry-up manners (せわしなき風俗)” ; the idea of “establishing an institution of courtesy” was proposed as the way to correct uncontrolledness in the “free and convenient” atmosphere of Edo. “An institution of courtesy” meant, to be specific, “with regard to clothing, shelter, furniture and utensil, manners of marriage and funeral, visitation, gift and taking apprentices, people should act differently in accordance with their rank, income or occupation” (*Seidan*, in *ST*, p311). This institution was considered to cover their all life-style. With this in mind, Sorai aimed to reestablish a feudal system. In arguing for the Confucian “Way,” Sorai made a model of ancient China, and thus followed “restorationism”^{vii} which seeks every standard in the legal systems described in Chinese classical texts. Of course, Sorai didn’t believe that he could perfectly apply the ancient Chinese administrative institution to the society in the Edo period, but he hoped to reestablish the feudalism in the shogunate system of the TOKUGAWA government.

4. Sorai's proposal

However, what Sorai’s intended was not to restrict people’s relocation to the city of Edo and rigorously govern

people by imposing an institution. Rather, he aimed at establishing a society in which people are connected with “obligation (恩義).” He mentioned the truth of the feudal system:

The Way of a feudalism is to treat people like the members of a family, in father-son [relationship]. With the centralized system, there are only laws to reply upon. There is decisive justice, but there are no appeals to compassionate gratitude or love (*Bendo*, in *ST*, pp21-22).

In feudal societies, the realm is divided among lords, and the Son of Heaven rarely governs directly. Vassals of these lords have stipends and hold their fiefs from generation to generation. Although some worthy individuals are hired, their social status is fixed: knights are always knights and lords are always lords; for this reason, people’s minds are settled and society is calm. Laws and regulations are rudimentary at best, and obligation, with priority given to instilling a sense of shame (*Sorai Sennsei Tomonsho*, in *SZ*, p434).

For Sorai, the relationship between a *daimyo* and his people was like that of family, in father-son relationship. But in the middle of the Edo period, because *bushis* did not stay in their own domain, “*Bushis* dealings with farmers are little more than battles over who taxes and who is taxed, and no feelings of obligation bind them to each other; in fact, *bushis* and farmers see each other as enemies” (*Sorai Sennsei Tomonsho*, in *SZ*, p447). Conversely, if a *daimyo* had gotten settled in his own domain, all people in his domain would have been bound to each other by “obligation (恩義)” ; thus Sorai wrote “if people have doubts they get apart, and if they trust one another they get closer” (*Sorai Sennsei Tomonsho* in *SZ*, p454). He emphasized that all of human acts consisted in mutual trust. He therefore denied the idea that “there are only laws to reply upon. ... but there are no appeals to compassionate gratitude or love.” Those who “live in so-called inn’s area” in Edo were losing those relationship. That is why Sorai tried to reestablish the relationship of obligation by applying the feudal system.

Sorai also thought that social-class systems could not function without a sense of responsibility called virtue of humanity (仁 *jin*) in which higher-ranking people support or treat with tenderness lower-ranking people. Only in such relationship, do “work” or “employment” take place normally. Sorai emphasized this and said, the Way (道) “is comparable to gentle breezes or sweet rain that nourish the myriad things and enable them to grow. While the myriad things differ, they are alike in receiving such nourishment in order to grow” (*Benmei*, in *ST*, p137). So, argued Sorai, the Way ordered us not to use people as labor and short-term contract apprentices, and urged each of us to grow up in long-term relationships and to exercise our own proper ability. He aimed to establish a communal society in which the abilities of all people would be united by “obligation” and “trust.”

Conclusion

Sorai analyzed the monetary economy during the Edo period, and concluded that it brought to people much convenience to purchase anything easily, while it had changed their social system so greatly that nobody could live without money. He thought that this was the very reason that people fell into poverty. And he was worried that the monetary economy left their society in “waste (奢)” and “hurry-up manners (せわしなき風俗).” “Waste (奢)” refers to the situation in which people have an abundance of products or merchandise without the awareness about

the limit of natural resources. ” Hurry-up manners (せわしなき風俗)” refers to the state of narrow-minded human nature that leads people to act without contemplation. Sorai pointed out that such social trend had destroyed close human relationships, as well as the “obligation” and “trust” among people, and warned that consequently it would lead to the decline of the TOKUGAWA shogunate.

As a Confucian, Sorai attempted to give a picture of society as a community that is maintained by obligation and trust. He recognized merchants as those who had mission to “keep products and goods circulating and thus benefit the people in the world” (*Sorai Sennsei Tomonsho*, in *SZ*, p430). He did not deny commercial actions themselves. But in his view, consumption should be just mere one side of such a communal society.

Notes

- i OGYU Sorai, *Sorai Sensei Tomonsho*, From *OGYU Sorai Zenshu 1 Gakumon ronshu* (SHIMADA Keiji, Tokyo: Misuzu shobo, 1973); hereafter, the book is referred to as *SZ*. English translations in this paper are based on *MASTER SORAI'S RESPONSALS: AN ANNOTATED TRANSLATION OF Sorai sensei Tomonsho* (Samuel Hideo Yamashita, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).
- ii OGYU Sorai, *Seidan*. From *Nihon Shisou Taikei vol. 36 OGYU Sorai* (YOSHIKAWA Kojirou, MARUYAMA Masao, NISHIDA Taichiro, TUJI Tathuya, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1973). Hereafter, the book is referred to as *ST*. Likewise, Sorai's works *Taiheisaku*, *Bendo*, and *Benmei*. Only *Bendo* and *Benmei*, English translations in this paper are based on *Ogyu Sorai's Philosophical Masterworks: The Bendo and The Benmei* (JOHN A. TUCKER, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006).
- iii 「旅宿の境界なる故、金無てはならぬ故、米を売て金にして、商人より物を買て日々送ることなれば、商人主と成て武家は客也。」(*Seidan*, in *ST*, p344)
- iv 「譜代者絶て皆出替り者に計也たるは武道の衰退」(*Seidan*, in *ST*, p294)
- v *Taiheisaku*, in *ST*, p476.
- vi 「制度と云は法制・節度の事也。古聖人の治に制度と言物を立て、是を以て上下の差別を立、奢を押へ、世界を豊かにするの妙術也。」(*Seidan*, in *ST*, p311)
- vii MARUYAMA Masao, *Nihon Seiji Shisoshi Kenkyu*, Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Shuppan-sha, 2004, p220.