

The Absorption and Transformation of Neo-Confucianism during the Edo Period of Japan

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Abstract The acceptance of neo-Confucianism during the Edo period in Japan was not a simple imitation or entire collection of the advanced country's high-quality resources by the backward country under cultural deficit, but a process of selection, absorption, transformation and localization. Its absorption was embodied in the transition from "nature" to "artificiality," as well as in the transition from "respect" to "sincerity." The transformation covered "Li-Qi Dualism," "Monarch-Subject united in righteousness," "Change of Ruling Imperial Family," etc. During the Edo period, Japan's absorption and transformation of neo-Confucianism showed features like indirect-to-direct, passive-to-active, subjective-and-selective, practical-and-applicable. Moreover, it followed the internal rule that based on Yamato people's values, thinking mode and aesthetic orientation, to form an ideological system with Japanese characteristics in the process of continuous collision, digestion and fusion with Confucianism.

Key words neo-Confucianism; the Edo period of Japan; localization; absorption; transformation

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After Confucianism was introduced to Japan, as a resource, it produced a profound impact

on Japan's politics, economy, culture, education and many other aspects. However, Japan's acceptance of Confucianism is not a simple imitation or entire collection of the advanced country's high-quality resources by the backward country under cultural deficit, but a process of selection, absorption, transformation and localization. After the introduction of neo-Confucianism, this tendency became especially obvious, and reached its peak in the Edo period (1603-1867). This article attempts to explore the process and features of Edo-Japan's acceptance of neo-Confucianism, in order to re-discover the contents and traits of Confucianism beyond ethnic and national boundaries through historical experience, and to seek the revival of Confucianism under the background of unprecedented changes in a century.

Process and Features of Edo-Japan's Absorption of Neo-Confucianism

According to *Kojiki* (712), pre-Qin Confucianism was introduced to Japan by Wani in the 5th century AD, followed by *Book of Changes*, *Book of Poetry*, *The Book of History*, *Zuo Zhuan*, *The Book of Rites*, and began to work in all fields of Japan. While the Muromachi period (1336-1573) began, with the introduction of neo-Confucianism, the influence of pre-Qin Confucianism gradually declined to the point where "only fragmented speech expressing political thought remains"¹. However, it cannot be denied that, due to the dominance of "Zen and Confucianism Integration," neo-Confucianism was not initially regarded as an ideological system independent from the native Zen in Japan. The main purpose of Zen monks preaching Confucianism is not to spread Confucianism, but to demonstrate the brilliance of Zen.

During the Edo period, Samurai class with political power and the merchant class with economic power coexisted as dual forces in Japan. Both the two classes showed active acceptance of neo-Confucianism to meet political and economic needs. In addition, the structure of Tokugawa feudalism was highly similar to that of Zhou Dynasty in China. Consequently, neo-Confucianism began to slip the leash of Zen and gradually developed into a dominant ideology. There were four main groups of Confucian scholars including Zhuzi school (represented by Seika Fujiwara, Razan Hayashi, Ansai Yamazaki, etc.), Yangming school (represented by Toju Nakae, Banzan Kumazawa, etc.), Ancient school (represented by Soko Yamaga, Jinsai Ito, etc.) and Kobunji-gaku (represented by Sorai Ogyu), among which Zhuzi school was the largest one. Some researchers oppose the division by school, but advocate that the acceptance and development of neo-Confucianism

¹ Kenichiro Ishida ed., *History of Japanese Land Tenure 22. History of Thought I* (Tokyo: Yamakawa Publishing Co. Ltd., 2001) 70-79. Anything not specifically marked is from the author's own translation.

in Edo-Japan should be divided into two successive stages with the year of 1733 (the 5th year after the death of Sorai Ogyu) as the dividing line. The early stage was consisted of the above-mentioned four schools, and the later stage mainly referred to Baigan Ishida's Shingaku¹. However, Confucian scholars of the latter stage did not make breakthroughs in the ideological contents or logical thinking, but only further emphasized the propositions advocated by Yangming school in the early stage. Therefore, on the whole, the acceptance of neo-Confucianism in Edo-Japan showed two transitions: from Samurai class to citizen class, and from Zhuzi school to Yangming school. These two transitions were embodied in changes from "nature" to "artificiality"² and from "respect" to "sincerity"³.

The transition from "nature" to "artificiality" was completed in sequence by four Confucian scholars, namely Razan Hayashi, Soko Yamaga, Jinsai Ito, Sorai Ogyu, and it was also reflected in the alternation of four Confucian schools. Neo-Confucianism advocated a worldview of "Harmony between Man and Nature," of which the essence was to derive social laws from natural laws, to guarantee the effectiveness of social laws with the authority of natural laws, and to implement social laws as a natural law. In fact, "Order of Nature" by neo-Confucianism contained "Order of Man," and its "Order of Man" was attached to "Order of Nature." Razan Hayashi highly praised the neo-Confucian notion that "Order of nature is order of man," and also emphasized the idea that laws of "nature" ought to cover moral laws like "to cultivate the self, regulate the family, govern the state, then lead the world to peace." However, with the shake and collapse of the shogunate system during Genroku and Kyoho periods, the notion that "Order of nature is order of man" lost social foundation on which it depended to survive. Thus, Japanese Confucian scholars began to shift their emphasis from natural laws to man-made laws. Among them, Soko Yamaga separated "Order of Nature" from "Order of Man," and laid more emphasis on "Order of Man." He claimed that only "Order of Man" could help people make judgements on the inadequacy and overabundance of desires. Later, Jinsai Ito went further to specify "Order of Man" into ethical guidelines, such as "benevolence, justice, etiquette, wisdom, faith," claiming that ethical guidelines were not inherent with people, but to be strived for by people. However, it was Sorai Ogyu who finally completed the transition of

1 Hiroshi Watanabe. *Neo-Confucianism in Tokugawa Japan* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 2010) 10-65.

2 Masao Maruyama. *Studies in intellectual history of Tokugawa Japan* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1952). The corresponding Japanese expressions are 「自然」和「作為」.

3 The corresponding Japanese expressions are 「つつしみ」和「まこと」.

neo-Confucianism from “nature” to “artificiality” in Japan. He replaced “Order of Man,” which was believed to be derived from “Order of Nature” by Zhuzi school, with man-made “*dao*” (the Confucian way). He held that “*dao*” was not an absolute abstract existence, but a common concrete man-made basis to form orders in daily human relations. So far, the transition from “nature” to “artificiality” was completed. Through this process, it is found that Japanese Confucian scholars were keen to the value orientation that serves the ruling class and provides theoretical basis for “making” “*dao*” to meet the ruling class’s interests. Meanwhile, modern Japanese law sprouted within the feudal system.

The transition from “respect” to “sincerity” actually reflected different choices and emphasis on the essential of virtues by Japanese Confucian scholars in the process of accepting neo-Confucianism. In China, the emphasis on both “sincerity” and “respect” began with pre-Qin Confucianism, then developed by Cheng-zhu School and gradually became an important part of Chinese Confucian ideological system. Seika Fujiwara, the earliest Confucian scholar in the Edo period of Japan, relatively faithfully accepted the concepts of “respect” and “sincerity” of Cheng-zhu school, and advocated equal emphasis on both. But later, Razan Hayashi laid more emphasis on “respect” and believed that “etiquette” was the universally basic principle. Therefore, in his opinion, it was “etiquette” that made people’s gestures and expressions meet the requirements of “respect.”¹ Moreover, Ansai Yamazaki also emphasized “respect” and considered it as an individual’s subjective consciousness. Predictably, at this stage, Japanese Confucian scholars’ understanding of “respect” had shown a clear introversion tendency. This was undoubtedly related to the ethical tradition of Japanese samurai class focusing on self-respect and it revealed the contradiction between “respect” in neo-Confucianism and “respect” in traditional Japanese views. After that, Soko Yamaga approved of “respect” in neo-Confucianism but laid more emphasis on “sincerity.” Moreover, Jinsai Ito regarded “sincerity” as the way and guarantee to realize “loyalty” and the foundation of virtues. Among latter Confucian scholars, more and more paid attention to “sincerity.” This was certainly related to the rise of Yangming school in Japan, but “makoto” advocated by Yangming school referred to the sincerity to intuitive knowledge, which was an attitude and process of cultivating the body and mind. But the “sincerity” understood by Japanese Confucian scholars related to “emotion,” which required sincere emotions toward others and into sincere actions. Therefore, through the transition from “respect” to “sincerity,” it is not difficult to see the tolerant attitude of Japanese Confucian scholars towards human desires and

1 Toru Sagara: *Sincere Japanese* (Tokyo: Perikansha Publishing Inc., 1980) 166-167.

their ethical position on physical sciences.

Process and Features of Edo-Japan's Transformation of Neo-Confucianism

When discussing the transformation of neo-Confucianism in Japan during the Edo period, Chinese and Japanese scholars usually hold two different positions. Chinese scholars are accustomed to analyzing the influence of Chinese Confucianism on Japanese Confucianism based on the inherent Chinese Confucian ideology; while Japanese scholars are committed to demonstrating the rationality of Japanese Confucian ideology to prove the effectiveness of its transformation. This article tries to analyze the process and characteristics of Japan's transformation of neo-Confucianism during the Edo period based on the historical facts of the dissemination of Confucian classics in Japan.

Firstly, Zhu Xi, the master of Confucian Idealistic School in Song Dynasty, advocated a cosmological system centered on "Li-Qi Dualism," but Japanese Confucian scholars did not faithfully inherit his ideas. Although Razan Hayashi agreed with "Li-Qi Dualism," he actually emphasized its ideology based on human nature and political position, rather than cosmology, by advocating Shinbutsu-shugo. Ansai Yamazaki claimed to be a loyal apprentice of Zhuzi school, but his understanding of "Li-Qi Dualism" was quite different from Zhu Xi's from the perspective of inquiry into physics. Zhu Xi emphasized the direction of transitions from physics to metaphysics and from "Fen Shu" to "Li Yi" in the process of inquiring into physics; while Ansai Yamazaki advocated the exclusion of physical "Li" and the direct transition from "heart" to "Li Yi" through "self-consciousness." From the above, Japanese Confucian scholars transformed Zhu Xi's thought from two aspects. First, they externalized Zhu Xi's metaphysical "Li" into the realistic principles or rules among substances. Second, they transformed Zhu Xi's "Li-Qi Dualism" into "Qi Monism" with Japanese characteristics. The external reason came from the "synchronic" coexistence of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism in Japan, which was different from the "diachronic" situation in China. Because most of the Japanese Confucian scholars had been influenced by Buddhism and Taoism, they inevitably felt "unacclimatized" when accepting Confucianism, which required transformation to be localized in Japan. The internal reason was attributed to the inherent way of thinking of Japanese people, that is, they are accustomed to regard the given environment and objective conditions as self-sufficient existence unattached to other matters.¹

1 Hajime Nakamura. *The Ways of thinking of Eastern people* (Tokyo: Shunjusha Publishing Company, 1989) 13.

Secondly, in terms of the monarch-subject relationship, Japanese Confucian scholars transformed “Monarch-Subject united in righteousness” into “Monarch-Subject united by origin.” In *Collected Annotations on the Analects*, Zhu Xi proposed that the Monarch and his ministers should be united by righteousness, which not only required ministers to be loyal to the emperor, but also required the emperor to treat his ministers with virtue, etiquette and justice. However, “filial piety,” which was based on consanguinity, only required the son to be filial to the father unilaterally, which was embodied in “father-son united by origin.” In Japan, since the selection of officials did not rely on the imperial civil examination system, but the “list of Kuge families” (the status of family), the relationship between the monarch and ministers had been determined since the birth, which was performed in the relationship between the monarch as the parent and the retainer as the family member. Based on this special feudal system and the Confucian principle of “father-son united by origin,” Japanese Confucian scholars transformed “Monarch-Subject united in righteousness” into “Monarch-Subject united in origin,” and required the ministers to be unilaterally loyal to the monarch. Since “loyalty” and “filial piety” were governed by the same principle, loyalty to the superior was filial piety, and vice versa. In ancient Japanese ethics, this was embodied as “a consistent loyalty and filial piety.”

Thirdly, “Change of Ruling Imperial Family” underwent a qualitative change in its connotation after being spread to Japan. It originally referred to the overthrow of the emperor’s ruling and the change of the name of the dynasty by high-status people according to the will of God. In China, Confucianism advocated kingcraft politics, and tyrants should be condemned by heaven and replaced by virtuous ones. Therefore, the change of dynasties was often accompanied by the change of ruling imperial family. But in Japan, subject to the theory of “divine descendants to be monarch,” only members of the Emperor family, who were descendants of Amaterasu-Omikami, were eligible to become emperors. Even after the Samurai seized power, the Emperor was still confined to his divine identity. Although he possessed no authority of force, he still enjoyed the authority of the divinity, so there was no possibility of being replaced by someone outside the emperor’s family. It was true that in the process of changing the samurai regime, not a few people preached “ruling by virtuous man” to prove the legitimacy of the seizure of power, but this was only for the inside of the samurai class, not including violating the divine authority, that is, the Emperor. Moreover, after the seizure of power, the preach of “ruling by virtuous man” immediately lost its value and meaning. Therefore, unlike Chinese “change of ruling imperial family” among emperor,

ministers and literati, Japanese “change of ruling imperial family” underwent a qualitative change in connotation, and it could only happen to those apart from the Emperor, like the Shogun, the Daimyo, and the Samurai.

In summary, on the one hand, the absorption of neo-Confucianism in the Edo period of Japan could be embodied in the transitions from “nature” to “artificiality,” and from “respect” to “sincerity.” But no matter what kind of transition, it never deviated from the scope of neo-Confucian world outlook, and it was always the result of Japanese Confucian scholars’ emphasis on different aspects of neo-Confucianism in different historical periods. On the other hand, during the Edo period, Japan also transformed neo-Confucianism’s “Li-Qi Dualism,” “Monarch-Subject united in righteousness,” “Change of Ruling Imperial Family.” However, no matter what kind of transformation, the original intention was not to fundamentally shake Japanese social system, but merely to make necessary measures to adapt neo-Confucianism to the system. Undeniably, during the Edo period, Japan’s absorption and transformation of neo-Confucianism showed features like indirect-to-direct, passive-to-active, subjective-and-selective, practical-and-applicable. Moreover, it followed the internal rule that based on Yamato people’s values, thinking mode and aesthetic orientation, to form an ideological system with Japanese characteristics in the process of continuous collision, digestion and fusion with Confucianism.

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