

April 21, 2000
Seminar Presentation

Some Comments on the Theme of Translation in Ogyû Sorai (1666-1728) and Ogata Kôan (1810-1863)

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I should like this morning to discuss the theme of "translation" in two recent studies of mine, one on Ogyû Sorai and the other on Ogata Kôan. Although these figures are related to my lecture yesterday on Maruyama Masao, as is the theme of "translation," my purpose for having done these essays was motivated by the functional demands put on me by different parts of the academic profession.

The essay on Kban was presented at a symposium on Osaka in the Tokugawa period. Since I had done a study on the Kaitokudô merchant academy, the organizers of the gathering wondered if I would be agreeable to doing an essay on Ogata Kôan, the headmaster of the Tekijuku, the school of Dutch learning that was located a stone's throw away from the Kaitokudô. (Wakita Osamu and James McClain, eds., *Osaka, The Merchants' Capital of Early Modern Japan* [Cornell, 1999]).

In the case of Sorai, I had been fascinated by his thinking for some time, beginning with my encounter of him through Inukai Tsuyoshi that I mentioned briefly yesterday, and had struggled through language training with his kanbun and *kakikudashibun*, the sinographic and the transliteration styles respectively, as part of my move some twenty-five years ago from the twentieth century back to the Tokugawa period. My interest in Sorai was also enhanced because of the "anti-Sorai" polemics expressed at the Kaitokudo. I did not, however, have plans to publish a piece on Sorai. It was an interest that was on the back burner, so to speak. But several years ago, John Dunn of Cambridge University asked if I would be interested in doing a Sorai volume for the Cambridge University Press series on political thought, and since John Dunn, a scholar of political theory, expressed a lively interest in introducing non-Western materials into the series, I happily agreed to take on the task (*Tokugawa Political Writings: Ogyû Sorai*, 1998).

These two subjects, in other words, are not linked in terms of an integrated conceptual design, and I hope you will allow me to discuss them as though they were related within the comparative theme of translation. You may recall that I referred to this problem of translation yesterday in my lecture on Maruyama Masao, especially with regard to his conversations with Katô Shûichi on *Translation and Japan's Modernity (Honyaku to Nihon no Kindai, 1998)*. As I mentioned, both these intellectuals agreed completely that translation was pivotal to Japan's modernity, beginning in the Tokugawa era and continuing into the modern and contemporary eras. Perhaps we may situate our discussion today with that theme in mind. In Sorai's case I am the translator; in Kôan's case he is the translator.



Let me begin with Sorai. I said that I "happily" agreed to undertake the Cambridge assignment, but I must confess that this feeling evaporated very quickly. Sorai, I am convinced more than ever, is untranslatable. I repeatedly found myself asking, "Why am I doing this, trying to translate the untranslatable?" Even Japanese scholars find Sorai very difficult to translate into modern Japanese, and I have actually encountered difficult passages that were simply deleted.

Walter Benjamin says in his *Task of the Translator* that a verbatim translation of a text is not a good translation. It would be boring. I agree with him, of course, but not so much to affirm his theory but as a defense against the inevitability of serious imperfection in my unhappy exercise. However, I felt, finally, that if there were to be a degree of new life in Sorai's texts it would have to be in the repetition of certain themes that presented themselves to me as a pattern of thinking. As translator I found myself asking whether I was hearing him correctly. I feel now that one not only "reads" and "translates" texts, but also "listens" to them, an idea advanced by Brian Stock in his essay *Listening for the Text: Uses of the Past* (Johns Hopkins, 1982). At times I could "hear" Sorai's texts, even as I was expressing his ideas in English. It is this listening to repetition, as in a consistent musical theme, that Gabrielle Spiegel has termed the "logic" of the historical text (*The Pastas Text, 1997*). Spiegel was seeking a theoretical way to read texts in medieval Europe, but her insight is suggestive in a broader sense.

It was only while translating Sorai into English that I began to grasp themes that I had not taken note of in Japanese historiographical accounts. Basic among these was Sorai's supposition that all human beings were born different; that their differences were gifts from Heaven and ought to remain that way; and that the ethical purpose of politics was to nourish these individual differences. Abstract

"names" were created by the Ancient Kings so that human beings could communicate over their differences, so that an individual was not conceptualized as being isolated. Rejecting this Zen view that above and below Heaven there is only solitary existence, Sorai situated the individual always in a social context. The social, however, must not mean that everyone shared a common goodness that was timeless. Governments, therefore, should not seek to make humans alike in society, for this required coercive legalism that would surely produce madness among the populace. For Sorai, goodness was the objective distribution of justice. Disagreements between human beings must be equitably settled. The issue in political administration must never be the imposition of a superior understanding of goodness that is located within the self, but the concrete settlement of grievances in a manner that was fair to the various parties involved—this he called "righteousness" or "justness" (*gi*).

Sorai often returned to the idea that one's distinctive virtue is purely from Heaven, not from parents or political leaders, not from princes and kings. Governments cannot know or control Heaven and hence cannot distribute virtues. They can nourish these virtues or choose not to do so. Governments must, however, know their limit vis-à-vis an unknowable Heaven. They can work with what Heaven gives to humans, but cannot change this.

Virtue that comes from Heaven is specific to the individual. One's basic mission in life, therefore, ought to be the realization of that particular virtue. While Sorai's ideas are about "politics," they are also about individual "practice"—*toku wa toku nari*, virtue as active realization. (His thinking resonates in this regard with Itô Jinsai's.)

Practice, in the realization of one's virtue, Sorai emphasized, must be driven by one's desire (*yoku*)—the desire to self-realization—and this desire must be sustained by "method"—*jutsu*, as in *jinjutsu*—by an immersion of oneself in an art—*gei ni asobu*—and, finally, by one's "passion," or *jô*. One must accept that this realization requires a struggle over a long period of time, as indicated in Confucius' comment that only in his fifties did he understand Heaven's mandate to him—*gojû nishite tenmei oshiru*.



Rendering Sorai into English, I became convinced that the views of scholars that he advocated legalistic totalitarian politics based on a contempt for commoners is misleading. The referencing of Sorai with Hobbes and Machiavelli has not helped in this regard. Sorai did believe that knowledge from the ancient

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