

The Humanistic Education in East Asia: With Special Reference to Ogyu Sorai

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Introduction

First, a word of caution. The term “humanistic education” can have a variety of meanings, varying with the interpretation of what is “humanistic” or “human”. In this investigation, I intend by this term the education that places emphasis on the humanistic studies (*studia humanitatis*) such as language, literature and history. The aim of this education is to make human being truly human. The basic insight of this education is the conviction that, language being the basic characteristic of human being, the care and cultivation of language plays a crucial role for education. This is the original meaning of humanistic education that was developed in Renaissance. So, my interpretation of humanistic education is much narrower than the interpretations of the other participants who adapt a broader version.

Now, despite this narrower understanding of humanistic education, something similar to it can still be found in East Asian traditions. Especially, the original teaching of Confucius can be rightly called humanistic in this sense. In this presentation, I will show first the humanistic features of the original thought of Confucius in the *Analects*. I will then indicate the significance of a Japanese Confucian scholar, Ogyu Sorai, who originated in Japan humanistic interpretation of Confucianism as opposed to the universalistic, metaphysical interpretation proposed by Zhu Xi Philosophy 朱子学 (Neo-Confucianism developed in the Song Dynasty). At the end, I will consider the significance of the humanistic education for contemporary education.

Chapter 1: Confucius, a Humanistic Teacher

There are two reasons to consider the original teaching of Confucius as predominantly humanistic.

First, the Confucian emphasis on *jen* 仁 makes Confucian education humanistic. This Chinese term had various translations, such as “Goodness”, “Love”, “Virtue” among others. However the translation “Humanity”, made by Wing-tsit Chan and then adapted by Tu Wei-ming, seems to be the most appropriate one. *Jen* is “the holistic manifestation of humanity in its commonest and highest state of perfection” (Tu, 1985). Confucian education was an education of learning to be human in the highest sense. In accordance with this, Confucius avoided discussions that might lead to metaphysical speculation. When his disciple Chi-lu asked how to serve the spirits of the dead and gods, Confucius answered “You are not able even to serve man. How can you serve the spirits?” When asked by the same person about death, his answer was “You do not understand even life. How can you understand death?” (*Analects*, 11, 12) And according to Tzu-kung: “one can get to hear the Master’s words on state’s rituals [Lau translates 文章 as “accomplishments” but I follow here the interpretation of Morohashi], but one cannot get to hear his view on human nature and the Way of Heaven.” (*Analects*, 5, 13)

Second, a corpus of literature inherited by ancient time played a decisive role in the Confucian learning. Confucius was a legendary editor of the Five Classics 五經, which were supposed to go back to Zhou 周 Dynasty. How many of these books Confucius edited and how ancient these books actually were are the subject of scholarly dispute. But more important is that Confucius cherished these books, especially the *Odes* 詩經, and made them the main subject of his school. Beside these books, he also cherished music that was supposed to go back to Zhou Dynasty. The reason of his preference of Zhou Dynasty is that it was the last of the 3 dynasties governed by legendary wise rulers. The literature and music of the first 2 dynasties (Xia 夏 Dynasty and Yin 殷 Dynasty) being lost, the literature and music of Zhou Dynasty were considered by Confucius as the only access to the good old time. [He said “Chou is resplendent in culture, having before it the example of the two previous dynasties. I am for the Chou.” (*Analects* 3, 14)] Confucius believed that it was the will of Heaven that he inherited the culture from King Wen 文王 of Zhou Dynasty and that he should transmit it to posterity (*Analects*, 9, 5)

The Confucian predilection of Zhou Dynasty is similar to Renaissance Humanists’ predilection of ancient Rome. Petrarch (1304-1374), for example, sincerely believed that the recovery of the literature of ancient Rome would bring complete renewal not only of culture but also politics to Italy of his own days. This was the reason why Petrarch compiled and edited the books of Livius, a great Roman historian.

The educational importance attributed to the Five Classics, especially the *Odes*, and music are attested by many passages of the *Analects*. His faith in the Five Classics was such that he declined any originality of his own teaching (*Analects* 7, 1). He said “I am not born with knowledge but, being fond of antiquity, I am quick to seek it.” (*Analects* 7, 20).

There are many passages in the *Analects* that attest Confucius’ predilection of the *Odes* (*Analects* 2,2; 3, 20) and music (*Analects* 3, 23; 3, 25; 7. 14[13]; 7, 32). He also tried to apply correct original pronunciation to the reading of the *Odes* (*Analects* 7, 18). He also acknowledged that after returning to Lu 魯, his home country, he had set music right by assigning proper places to the sections of the *Odes* (*Analects* 9, 13). This is a rare statement for a modest person like Confucius!

The *Odes* and music occupied a central place in Confucian learning. He exhorted: “Be stimulated by the *Odes*, take your stand on the rites and be perfected by music.” (*Analects*, 8, 8) The school of Confucius was a learning community of friends who together tried to attain the highest humanity through the learning of ancient books and music (*Analects* 1, 1; 12, 14). However, we should not forget that for Confucius the purpose of learning poetry was not primarily aesthetic but moral and political. Confucius said: “If a man who knows the three hundred *Odes* by heart and fails when given administrative responsibilities and proves incapable of exercising his own initiative when sent to foreign states, then what use are the *Odes* to him, however many he may have learned?” (*Analects* 13, 5) Confucius saw many merits in learning the *Odes*: “Why is it none of you, my young friends, study the *Odes*? An apt quotation from the *Odes* may serve to stimulate the imagination, to show one’s breeding, to smooth over difficulties in a group and to give expression to complaints. Inside the family there is the serving of one’s father; outside there is the serving of one’s lord; there is also the acquiring of a wide knowledge of the names of birds and beasts, plants and trees.” (*Analects* 18, 9)

Why then had learning of the *Odes* moral and political significance? The key lies in the Confucian concept of *li* 禮. *Li* is usually translated as rites or rituals, but its application transcends the religious sphere and covers ordinary acts in every day life, even eating and drinking. The eleventh book of the *Analects* simply describes various acts and manners of Confucius in rituals as well as in daily life. All of these can be understood as concrete expressions of *li*. And yet, *li* was not simply “manners” that can be easily acquired by imitation. It required as its base wide learning of ancient books. Confucius says: “The gentleman widely learned in culture 文 but brought back to essentials by the rites 禮 can, I suppose, be relied upon not to turn against what he stood for.” (*Analects* 6, 27)

Confucius’s son Po-yu testified that Confucius gave him no secret doctrine. He only asked his son if he learned the *Odes* and the rites (*Analects* 16, 13. cf. 17, 10)

Chapter 2 : Sorai, the First Humanistic Confucian scholar in Japan

Confucianism was brought to Japan in the fifth century. But it was only in the seventeenth century that it became predominant. Before that time Buddhism played an active and leading role in Japanese thought. In the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Tokugawa Dynasty adopted Confucianism in the form of Zhu Xi Philosophy as the official doctrine. Zhu Xi Philosophy was Neo-Confucianism established in Song Dynasty. It was an all-embracing doctrine with strong metaphysical tendency. It was also eclectic and absorbed metaphysical doctrines originally developed by Taoism and Buddhism. It had great influence as the state doctrine in China, Korea (after the thirteenth century), and Japan. In its scale and influence, we may say that Zhu Xi Philosophy was the Scholasticism of the East. And yet, there were also critical reactions to it. In the seventeenth century Japan, Nakae Toju 中江藤樹(1608-1648), a follower of Wang Yangmin 王陽明, and Ito Jinsai 伊藤仁齋 launched criticism of Zhu Xi Philosophy. But it was Ogyu Sorai 荻生徂徠 (1666-1728) who made an epoch.

Sorai was a Confucian scholar of Edo period. His patron was Yanagisawa Yoshiyasu 柳沢吉保 who exercised great political power as a senior councilor of the 5th Shogun, Tsunayoshi 德川綱吉. Sorai not only taught Confucianism but also was a personal advisor of Yanagisawa. He has been a well-known scholar since his days, but it was a book written by Maruyama Masao 丸山眞男(1914-1996), a famous political theorist and historian, that made Sorai one of the most principal figures in Japanese intellectual history. In his book, *The Study of the History of Japanese Political Thought* 日本政治思想史研究(1952), Maruyama emphasized that Sorai was the first Japanese thinker who distinguished political philosophy from moral philosophy and insisted the precedence of political philosophy. Maruyama even talked about Sorai’s “discovery of politics” in the feudal system of Tokugawa Dynasty. Now, it is beyond the scope of this presentation to examine this thesis of Maruyama, important as it may be. We have chosen Sorai because he may also be called the first humanistic thinker in Japan. In order to show this, it is necessary to compare his thought with the philosophy of Zhu Xi Philosophy.

Zhu Xi Philosophy established a great metaphysical edifice in which concepts such as Heaven 天 and Nature 性 played important role. In order to establish such a system,

Zhu Xi Philosophy made an active use of the books written after Confucius. These are *Mencius* 孟子, the *Great Learning* 大學 and the *Doctrine of the Mean* 中庸. These books, together with the *Analects*, constituted the Four Books 四書, the great Canon of Zhu Xi Philosophy. The characteristics of these books were that unlike the *Analects*, in which Confucius rarely talked about Heaven or Nature, they made positive use of them. This is especially so in the *Doctrine of the Mean*, in which the Will of Heaven 天命, Nature, the Way 道 and Teaching 教 were interrelated to form a systematic unity.

Sorai, on the other hand, considered the Four Books, with the exception of the *Analects*, as the products of the polemic that later Confucianism had to face against Taoism and Buddhism. The metaphysical speculations in these books were the responses to the polemic with other schools. Ironically, these responses did not settle the matter but lead to the unending conflict of interpretations on concepts such as Heaven and Nature. Sorai thought this process as a deviation from the original thought of Confucius.

The rejection of metaphysics was at the same time the rediscovery of history. Instead of searching the ultimate metaphysical ground of Confucianism, he saw the origin and essence of Confucianism in the devotion to the culture and rites of the Ancient Kings 先王. Sorai said: “Learning means the learning of the Way of Ancient Kings. The Way of Ancient Kings consists in Poetry 詩, Political Literature 書, Rites 禮, and Music 樂. Therefore Learning solely consists of learning Poetry, Political Literature, Rites, and Music.” (*Benmei*, vol. 2 弁明下) This led to the rehabilitation of the Five Classics. Without the knowledge of them, Sorai contested, one cannot understand Confucius.

The Ancient Kings were also called the Sacred Men 聖人. But here again, Sorai rejected any metaphysical interpretation: they were sacred, not because they had some kind of intuition of the cosmic Reason 理, but because they were the makers and creators of Poetry, Political Literature, Rites, and Music. He says: “The Sacred Men are also only human. Just as men have different virtue according to their nature, so the Sacred Men do not all have the same virtue. Nevertheless, they are all equally called sacred 聖 because of their making 制作.” (*Benmei*, vol 1 弁明上)

Now, the study of the Five Classics was not an easy matter. These are old books that contained different vocabularies. It is no exaggeration to say that they were written in a different language than Classical Chinese. In order to read the Five Classics, Sorai developed a philological method called the Ancient Rhetoric 古文辭學, which he adapted from the Ancient Rhetoric School of Ming period. Sorai was well aware of the historical change of language and warned against an ahistorical interpretation of ancient texts. Here again, Sorai blamed Zhu Xi Philosophy because “it saw the ancient sentences with the eye of modern sentences, and ancient language with the eye of modern language. This is the reason why it could not attain the ancient Way even though it worked hard at using the mind” (*Benmei*, vol. 2 弁明下). The emphasis on historic nature of language and adaption of philology as the valued method is the characteristic that Sorai shared with Renaissance humanists. Renaissance humanists strongly opposed to Scholasticism that interpreted ancient Greek and Latin texts from a universal and ahistorical point of view. This is quite similar to Sorai’s opposition to Zhu Xi Philosophy.

This is the reason why I would like to call Sorai “the first humanistic thinker in Japan”. And yet, there was limitation, too. Sorai’s main and official interest (as a teacher

of Confucianism and political advisor) was limited to the interpretation of ancient Chinese texts, even though as a private person he was strongly interested in ancient Japanese poetry. But his philological method later influenced Motoori Norinaga 本居宣長(1730-1801) who applied rigorous philological method to an ancient Japanese text, *Kojiki* 古事記, which until his days was almost unreadable. It was great merit of Norinaga to have liberated the interpretation of ancient Japanese texts such as *Kojiki* and the *Story of Genji* 源氏物語 from the interpretation influenced by Zhu Xi Philosophy, which he rejected as “Chinese mind” 漢心.

Chapter 3 Contemporary Significance of the Humanistic Education

Finally, I would like to consider the contemporary significance of the humanistic education represented by Confucius, Sorai, and Norinaga.

My strategy here is not to contrast the East against the West. Rather, I would call the Western humanistic tradition as an ally to fight against certain intellectual trends: the temptation of an all-embracing and universalistic theory.

Such trends were represented in the East by Zhu Xi Philosophy, in the West by Scholasticism. Positivism was a modern form of such a trend. In our age, the so-called globalization and standardization is exercising a more subtle form of dominance. Just as Zhu Xi Philosophy and Scholasticism were built on the rock of the lingua francas of their age, Classical Chinese and Latin, so English is a basis of globalization and standardization.

Now, the problem of these trends is that they are insensitive of cultural and linguistic differences. Rather, they assume the validity of Universal Reason, such as 理 or *logos* or *ratio*. In our age, number has substituted these metaphysical concepts. Number is a secular form of the once metaphysical *logos*. In our educational practice, number serves as a basis of accountability. Academic achievement translated into numbers has become the basis of evaluation and international competition.

Against such trends, humanistic education can serve as a healthy antidote. It can show historical and culture-specific aspects of each language that can be overlooked by universalistic trends. In this respect, the achievement of Norinaga to liberate ancient Japanese literature from the dominant interpretation of Zhu Xi Philosophy can serve as a model, with a caution that such an interpretation may not be used by nationalism. In order to perform such a task, humanistic education must leave behind the chauvinistic preference of a particular culture or age as “the classical”. Otherwise, humanistic education runs the risk of falling in yet another form of authoritarianism, a sort of parochial and chauvinistic authoritarianism contrasted with universalistic authoritarianism of its opponent.

In order to achieve this, humanistic education may be well advised to find an ally in hermeneutics and multiculturalism. Hermeneutics, as a direct heir of Renaissance humanism, can equip humanistic education with updated theories of interpretation. Multiculturalism, as the affirmation of the multicultural condition, will liberate humanistic education from becoming nationalistic and parochial. Humanistic education, on the other hand, may be able to provide hermeneutics and multiculturalism with wide resources inherited from the history of the East and the West.

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