

**DISASTER-RELIEF CONFUCIAN-STYLE:  
NINOMIYA SONTOKU'S PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH  
TO LATE-TOKUGAWA POVERTY**

*John A. Tucker  
East Carolina University*

**Introduction**

Assessing Confucianism as a socio-political system of learning, the mid-Tokugawa thinker Andō Shōeki 安藤昌益 (1703-1762) recorded the following:

A canine once observed, ‘We dogs are born of the *ki* 氣, of the pots and pans of people’s homes. We eat leftover scraps of human food and their uneaten rice. We help our masters by barking at suspicious shadows and thieves. We do not cultivate but greedily devour our masters’ leftovers because we are born dominated by the sideways *ki*. Since this is the role provided us by the true [way] of heaven, it is not our failing. But there are many in the world of [artificial human] law who are our imitators: the Confucian scholars and sages from one generation to the next, from age to age including...Confucius 孔夫子 (551-479 B.C.E.), Mencius 孟子 (372-289 B.C.E.)...and in Japan, Prince Shōtoku 聖德太子 (ca. 573-621) and generations of scholars on up to Hayashi Razan 林羅山 (1583-1657) and Ogyū Sorai 荻生徂徠 (1666-1728). All of them appropriated the fruits of the labors of the many, fruits produced in accord with heaven’s way, yet they appropriated them without doing any cultivating themselves. They greedily devoured the surplus of the many...They were born of an unbalanced *ki*, and so they gather the suspicious shadows of their unbalanced feelings and unbalanced thoughts into books. They create words and writings as tools to take the way of heaven into their own hands...None of the countless passages in their books tell of the way of the true [way] of heaven; their writings are nothing more than arbitrary and willful falsehoods’.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Toshinobu Yasunaga, trans., *Ando Shoeki: Social and Ecological Philosopher in Eighteenth-Century Japan* (NY: Weatherhill Press, 1992), p.

Shōeki's sharp criticisms of Confucian thought presumably issued from his personal experience of a succession of famines in his home region in northeast Japan, famines that resulted in, among other things, widespread infanticide. That Shōeki would blame the ruling samurai elite and the philosophical thought often associated with it, Confucianism, is not entirely surprising. In Shōeki's mind, apparently, farm families were starving because an "unproductive class of consumers" was "expropriating the products of the peasants' labor without doing any work," i.e., without engaging in "direct cultivation" (*chokkō* 直耕). Shōeki's critical wrath was not restricted to Confucianism: Buddhism, Daoism, and Shinto were equally to blame in his mind.<sup>2</sup>

It is clear that Shōeki lived well before Ninomiya Kinjirō 二宮金次郎, or Sontoku 尊徳 (1787-1856), as he would be known. Ninomiya's life and thought became, even within his own day, a powerful testament to the exceptional willingness of those with training in Confucianism to do more than pontificate about goodness and the need for ensuring the well-

---

143. Shōeki's works were only discovered in the late-nineteenth century by Kanō Kōkichi 狩野亨吉 (1865-1942) who pioneered, in the late-1920s and 1930s, studies of this otherwise unknown egalitarian thinker from the mid-Tokugawa. For a classic English language study of Shōeki, see E. H. Norman, *Andō Shōeki and the Anatomy of Japanese Feudalism* (Tokyo: Asiatic Society of Japan, 1949). Herman's scholarship in general is the focus of a lengthy study by John Dower, *Origins of the Modern Japanese State: Selected Writings of E. H. Norman* (NY: Pantheon Books, 1975). Another noteworthy piece of western language scholarship on Shōeki is Jacques Joly, *Le naturel selon Andō Shōeki: un type de discours sur la nature et la spontanéité par un maître-confucéen de l'époque Tokugawa, Andō Shōeki, 1703-1762* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 1996). Japanese studies of Shōeki have flourished in the postwar period, most likely because the Confucian thought that Shōeki so enjoyed lambasting had been widely appropriated by militarist ideologues during the 1930s and early 1940s.

<sup>2</sup>Maruyama Masao, *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan*, trans. Mikiso Hane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 253-254. While the contents of this volume first appeared as a series of essays, they were republished in a monograph entitled *Nihon seiji shisōshi kenkyū* 日本政治思想史 研究 (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Shuppansha, 1952), p. 255.

being of all. Ninomiya's example was so moving that in Meiji times, Ninomiya *jinja* – which commemorate his Herculean efforts toward reviving poverty stricken agricultural regions – appeared, first in Odawara and then in scattered sites from one end of Japan to the other. In the early-twentieth century, Ninomiya was elevated as a moral paragon for young Japanese school children. Bronze statues of him, walking bent over carrying firewood on his back so that he could hold a book he was reading, were commonly found in front of schools throughout Japan.<sup>3</sup> In the late 1980s, the Monbusho even discussed the notion of reintroducing the ideas of Ninomiya through the erection of new statues for school grounds that no longer had them.<sup>4</sup>

While Ninomiya was hardly a doctrinaire Confucian – indeed he described his own teachings as a kind of medicinal mixture of Shintō, Confucianism and Buddhism<sup>5</sup> – even a brief look at his life shows that Confucian notions were fundamental to his work toward improving the socio-economic lot of humanity. In his unrelenting efforts to restore failed

---

<sup>3</sup> Roger Goodman, *Children of the Japanese State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 123.

<sup>4</sup> Stuart Pickens, *Sourcebook in Shintō: Selected Documents* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), p. 225.

<sup>5</sup> For Ninomiya's characterization of his teachings, see Naramoto Tatsuya and Nakai Nobuhiko, eds., *Ninomiya-ō yawa* (Old Ninomiya's Evening Dialogues), in *Ninomiya Sontoku/Ōhara Yūgaku*, Nihon shisō taikai, vol. 52 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1973), p. 233; for an English translation of this passage, see Tadaatsu Ishiguro, ed., *Ninomiya Sontoku: His Life and Evening Talks* (Tokyo: Kenkyūsha, 1955), pp. 92-95. For another translation of this work, see Isoh Yamagata, *Sage Ninomiya's Evening Talks* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1970). The *Ninomiya-ō yawa* 二宮翁夜話, here translated as *Ninomiya's Evening Dialogues*, was written by Fukuzumi Masae (1824-1892), one of Ninomiya's closest disciples and later founder of the first Meiji-period Hōtokusha. An abridged, modern edition of the *Ninomiya-ō yawa* is in Nakamura Yukihiro, ed., *Andō Shōeki/Tominaga Nakamoto/Miura Baien/Ishida Baigan/Ninomiya Sontoku/Kaihō Seiryō* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1971), pp. 303-348. For a recent study of Ninomiya, see Eiji Takemura, *The Perception of Work in Tokugawa Japan: A Study of Ishida Baigan and Ninomiya Sontoku* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1997).

farming villages – essentially sites of socio-economic disaster – Ninomiya's efforts echoed important tenets of basic Confucian texts, especially the *Great Learning* 大學 (C: *Daxue*, J: *Daigaku*, hereafter, the latter) and the *Doctrine of the Mean* 中庸 (C: *Zhongyong*, J: *Chūyō*). For those hoping for exotic, even esoteric solutions to the socio-economic disasters that befall humanity either due to natural or human causes, or both, Ninomiya's thought, a kind of philosophy of disaster-relief, offers little. Rather than abstruse answers or mysterious otherworldly solutions, Ninomiya advocates, simply put, human work, engaged in with tireless determination, not for one's own sake, but rather for that of all of humanity. If such other-oriented, unrelenting efforts are offered, then one's virtue (*toku* 徳) will be repaid (*hō* 報) with plenty. To cast this anachronistically, selfless hard work for others was Ninomiya's way of managing federal emergencies.

### Biographical Sketch

Ninomiya Kinjirō was born in Sagami Province, or present-day Kanagawa-ken, to a peasant family clearly on the decline. According to a biographical account recorded by disciples, Ninomiya's father had a fondness for alcohol, one catered to by the ever-filial Kinjirō, who worked to earn the money needed to provide sake for his self-indulgent parent. Eventually orphaned at 16, he was then raised somewhat exploitatively by a self-centered uncle who could not tolerate the prospect of Ninomiya eking out rape seed oil to read by during the evening hours. As a result, Ninomiya was forced to carry a copy of the *Daigaku*, reportedly one of his favorite texts, with him during the day so that he could multitask by reading while walking to work, etc. After leaving his uncle's house, Ninomiya's unrelenting industry enabled him to recover his deceased father's homestead and turn it into a profit-generating holding. This turnaround captured the attention of local administrators who soon conveyed the word to the *daimyō* of Odawara 小田原 domain. With persistent requests to duplicate his approach to reviving lethargic peasant holdings that were no longer producing tax income, administrators of Odawara persuaded Ninomiya to help them reinvigorate the peasant economies of a number of farming villages. These successes prompted Mizuno Tadakuni 水野忠邦 (1794-1851), a senior Tokugawa administrator, to entrust Ninomiya with agrarian renewal in Shimōsa Province or present-day Chiba-ken and Sōma domain or Fukushima-ken, and ultimately, an extensive swath of farming villages in Nikkō 日光.

Ninomiya's successes in reviving peasant agrarian economies were the result of his instructing farmers in successful agricultural techniques, and his advocacy of selflessly giving all that one earns, with the understanding that it is by giving aggressively to others – heaven, earth, and humanity – that what one has received from them might be repaid (*hōtoku* 報德). Ninomiya added that it is by giving to others that one comes to receive in turn abundantly. Along with repaying virtue, Ninomiya emphasized the importance of diligence, sincerity, humaneness, and compassion as ethical keys to socio-economic recovery. Due to his unflagging emphasis on hard work, the obligation to give to others, and the importance of working together at the local level rather than expecting help from the center, Ninomiya was elevated as a paragon of virtue not long after his death, a status that he retains in many circles even today.

### **The *Daigaku***

According to the *Hōtoku ki*, a biographical account of Ninomiya by a disciple, Tomita Kōkei, the first book that Ninomiya supposedly read was the *Daigaku*. A brief work, the *Daigaku* circulated throughout most of Chinese literary and philosophical history prior to the Song 宋 dynasty (960-1279) as a chapter in the *Liji* 禮記 (J: *Raiki*), or *Book of Rites*. It was in the Song that successive Confucian scholars, in an effort to redefine the textual basis of their learning, elevated the *Rites* chapter to book status, and designated it the first of a four-book curriculum, including also the *Analects of Confucius* (C: *Lunyu* 論語 J: *Rongo*), the *Mencius* (C: *Mengzi* 孟子 J: *Mōshi*), and the *Doctrine of the Mean*. The last text was, like the first, formerly a chapter of the *Rites*, now elevated to book status, and the subject of repeated commentaries. The *Mean* was cast as the most “final” of the four books, or *shisu* 四書 (J: *shisho*), largely due to its metaphysical themes. The *Daigaku* on the other hand was praised as “the gateway to learning,” signifying its role as the most primary and fundamental text of the new philosophical canon. In part because of their reconfiguration of Confucian literature, the Song scholars came to be referred to, especially in the West, as “Neo-Confucians,” highlighting the extent to which their understanding of Confucian learning differed significantly from the ancient teachings of Confucius and Mencius.

Ninomiya is reported to have carried the *Daigaku* with him everywhere he went, reading it while walking, and often reading it out loud. Even during his trips into the forested mountains to gather firewood,

Ninomiya supposedly had a copy in hand. While these accounts should not be accepted in their entirety, there appears to be an element of truth in them given the importance of the *Daigaku* for connecting, in a tight logical progression, self-cultivation with bringing peace and order to the entire world. In the later statues depicting Ninomiya carrying firewood and reading a book, there can be little doubt that the book he was carrying was indeed the *Daigaku*.

Ninomiya's lifework, helping peasant-farmers to recover their farming operations and restore their villages, was apparently based on his commitment to the logic of activism outlined in the *Daigaku*. The text opens stating:

The way of great learning consists of illuminating luminous virtue, loving the people, and abiding by the highest good. 大學之道在明明德，在親民，在止於至善 ...

Those ancients who wanted to illuminate luminous virtue throughout all below heaven, first ordered well their states. 古之欲明明德於天下者，先治其國

Wanting to order their states, they first regulated their families. 欲治其國者，先齊其家

Wanting to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. 欲齊其家者，先修其身

Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. 欲修其身者，先正其心

Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. 欲正其心者，先誠其意

Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge. 欲誠其意者，先致其知

The extension of knowledge consists in the investigation of things. 致知在格物

Things being investigated, knowledge became complete. 物格而後知至

Their knowledge being complete, their thoughts were sincere. 知至而後意誠

Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were then rectified. 意誠而後心正

Their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated.

心正而後身修

Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated.

身修而後家齊

Their families being regulated, their states were rightly governed.

家齊而後國治

Their states being rightly governed, the entire world was at peace.

國治而後天下平

From the Son of Heaven down to the masses of humanity, all must consider the cultivation of the person the root of everything. 自天子以至於庶人，壹是皆以修身為本<sup>6</sup>

Mention of the *Daigaku* in the *Hōtoku ki* was more than just textual name-dropping: in his *Evening Dialogues* (*Ninomiya-ō yawa* 二宮翁夜話), Ninomiya explains how sages were "inordinately avaricious" individuals in their wants and wishes for the well-being of others. Although a dedicated student of the *Daigaku*, Ninomiya often paraphrases, roughly, what he considered its gist. Thus, Ninomiya explains the desires of the sages as consisting in their longing:

...to make the ten-thousand people happy by ensuring that they have enough food, clothing, and shelter. It is their desire that the people amass great good fortune. The way to do this is to open up the states (*kuni* 国), develop natural resources, give good government by wise statesmanship, and relieve the masses from

---

<sup>6</sup>The *Daxue* has been translated any number of times. For a philosophically sensitive rendering of the opening portion of the *Daxue*, see Irene Bloom's translation in William Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, eds., *Sources of Chinese Tradition, Volume One, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 330-333. Most translators have been conservative in their glosses, endorsing established renditions rather than pioneering wholly different interpretation. However, one example of the latter is Andrew Plaks, trans., *Ta Hsüeh and Chung Yung (The Highest Order of Cultivation and On the Practice of the Mean)* (NY: Penguin Books, 2003). Several modern Japanese editions of the *Daxue* are available, including Shimada Kenji, ed., *Daigaku/Chūyō*, in *Chūgoku kotensen*, 6 (Tokyo: Asahi shinbunsha, 1978); and Uno Tetsuto, ed., *Daigaku* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1999).

distress. Thus does the way of the sages aim at good administration of the state (*kokka* 国家) by wise statesmanship as well as the enhancement of happiness of the people at large. These ideas are clearly evident in the *Daigaku*, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, and other writings...<sup>7</sup>

Ninomiya's appeals to the *Daigaku* were not, apparently, random phenomena. Numerous allusions to the *Daigaku*, the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, and the *Doctrine of the Mean* in particular occur throughout the *Evening Dialogues*. Another significant passage is dated to Kōka 弘化 1 (1844), shortly after the Tokugawa shogunate had commissioned Ninomiya to bring uncultivated lands belonging to the Nikkō Shrine, into cultivation. Here Ninomiya, responding to congratulations from followers, notes that his "fundamental desire" (*hongan* 本願) is "to open up the uncultivated fields of people's minds by cultivating the good seeds of humaneness (*jin* 仁), justice (*gi* 義), propriety (*rei* 禮), and wisdom (*chi* 智), received from heaven, and then sowing the harvest repeatedly, spreading the good seeds throughout the country." Ninomiya adds, "if the uncultivated portion of one person's mind is opened up, there is no need to worry if there are uncultivated fields extending for thousands of acres" because of the power of that one mind spreading to others, and then bringing all under cultivation. In concluding, Ninomiya observes that "in the *Daigaku*, it is written that the aim of learning is to illuminate luminous virtue, to renew the people, and to abide in the highest goodness. 'Illuminating luminous virtue' consists in opening up people's minds...If we can establish regulations (*hō* 法) which enable people to abide in the highest goodness, we will be repaying the blessings (*on* 恩) received from our parents."<sup>8</sup>

Ninomiya did not always, however, agree with the *Daigaku*. The latter is well-known for addressing the balance between self and material things, and favoring the absolute integrity of the self. The *Daigaku* explains:

<sup>7</sup>Naramoto and Nakai, eds., *Ninomiya Sontoku/Ōhara Yūgen*, p. 226-227; and Ishiguro, ed., *Ninomiya Sontoku*, p. 91.

<sup>8</sup>Naramoto and Nakai, eds., *Ninomiya-ō Yawa*, pp. 154-155; and Ishiguro, *Ninomiya Sontoku*, pp. 118-121.

The ruler first is careful regarding his own virtue. If he maintains his virtue, he will have the support of people. If he has the support of people, he will have land at his disposal. If he has land at his disposal, he will have wealth. If he has wealth (*zai* 財), he will be able to use it. Virtue is the root, while wealth is the branch. If he regards the root as superfluous and the branch as essential, then he will struggle with the people and teach them to steal...A humane person (*jinmono* 仁者) establishes his personhood (*hatsumi* 發身) by using his wealth (以財), but the inhumane person (*fujinmono* 不仁者) establishes wealth by using [prostituting] himself.<sup>9</sup>

Ninomiya does not entirely concur with this, noting that even if one has the right sense of purpose, but no resources, what indeed can one do? Surely Ninomiya's gracious realism here was based on work with the poor. He observes that for those who have right intentions, a humane mind, and are deferential to their parents, but have no resources, there is indeed a way which involves using themselves [sacrificing themselves] for the development of wealth. Ninomiya insists that if one's sense of purpose is correct, then even if one does "use himself for the sake of establishing wealth," he should not be called "inhumane." The reason is that "using oneself for the sake of establishing wealth" is "the way of the poverty stricken" while "establishing oneself by using one's wealth" is "the way of the well-to-do." Ninomiya admits that if the poverty stricken, after gaining wealth by means of using themselves, then proceed to use the wealth they acquired to acquire even more wealth, such behavior should be called "inhumane." But he adds "unless a person has acted inhumanely toward others, they should not easily be called inhumane."<sup>10</sup>

It might seem farfetched that Ninomiya, or anyone for that matter, would take the *Daigaku* seriously as a philosophical statement addressing disaster relief. Yet, the text was sufficiently respected that no less a critic than Andō Shōeki occasionally voiced pointed opposition to Confucianism as a whole by targeting the *Daigaku*. Though Shōeki's criticisms do question the significance of the *Daigaku*, because he targets it for critique suggests its very importance nevertheless. In one passage Shōeki remarked:

<sup>9</sup>De Bary and Bloom, eds., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Volume One, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, pp. 332-333.

<sup>10</sup>Naramoto and Nakai, eds., *Ninomiya ō yawa*, pp. 223-224.

The sages say, “Control yourself, order your families, govern your realms, and bring peace to all below heaven.” The scholars of the world esteem these words. But do they truly have any value whatsoever? When there is a bad harvest, it is the scholars who eat greedily without cultivating, who are the least able to control themselves. Suffering from starvation, they must either extort food from the masses who cultivate or die of starvation themselves...<sup>11</sup>

Another indication of the importance of the *Daigaku* in Tokugawa thought, especially as it related to disaster relief, is found in Kumazawa Banzan 熊沢蕃山 (1619-1691), the seventeenth-century scholar who was placed under house arrest for his “offensive work,” in the *Daigaku wakumon* 大學或問 (Questions and Answers on the *Daigaku*), a text addressing the socio-economic and political issues of the day in a forthright, openly critical manner.<sup>12</sup> That Banzan chose the *Daigaku* framework for his analysis of the ills of his day and ways to solve them reflects, most surely, what Ninomiya saw as well: that the *Daigaku* is a fit vehicle for the expression of a systematic political approach to bringing peace and prosperity to the realm. The fact that Banzan ran into official trouble for having written his *Daigaku wakumon* suggests that the Tokugawa shogunate also saw the potentially

---

<sup>11</sup>Translation adapted from William Theodore de Bary, Carol Gluck, and Arthur Tiedmann, eds., *Sources of Japanese Tradition, Volume Two, 1600-2000*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 423. For another, lengthier iteration of Shōeki's critique of the *Daigaku*, see Shōeki, Shizen shineido, kan 6, in Bitō Masahide 尾藤正英 and Shimazaki Takao 島崎隆夫, eds., Andō Shōeki 安藤昌益/Satō Nobuaki 佐藤信淵, *Nihon shisō taikai* vol. 45 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1977), pp. 228-229.

<sup>12</sup>For a translation study, see Galen M. Fisher, “Kumazawa Banzan: His Life and Ideas,” and “*Dai Gaku Wakumon*: A Discussion of Public Questions in the Light of the *Great Learning*,” *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, Second Series vol. XVI (May 1938), pp. 221-258, 259-356. A modern edition of the *Daigaku wakumon* is in Gotō Yōichi 後藤陽一 and Tomoeda Ryūtarō 友枝龍太郎, eds., *Kumazawa Banzan*, *Nihon shisō taikai* vol. 30 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1971), pp. 405-463.

problematic nature of the text over which they would have preferred to have monopoly interpretive rights.

### **The Working of Humaneness and Utmost Sincerity**

Upon agreeing to supervise restoration of the poverty stricken and fiscally dysfunctional villages assigned to the *daimyō* of Odawara, Ninomiya remarked, "only humane methods can restore peace and abundance to these poor people."<sup>13</sup> Ninomiya's reference to "workings of humaneness" (*jinjutsu* 仁術), alludes to the *Mencius* 1A/7, where Mencius explains to King Xuan of Qi that his sense of pity for an ox about to be led to the sacrifice reflects the "workings of humaneness" that otherwise, generally take the form of protecting the people; an expression of virtue that makes one fit to be a king.<sup>14</sup>

Yet when speaking in more comprehensive terms, Ninomiya defined his "way" (*waga michi* 我が道) as "utmost sincerity" (*shisei* 至誠) and "real practice" (*jikkō* 實行), adding that it can be "extended to birds, beasts, insects, fish, grasses, and trees." Admitting that "talent, wisdom, and eloquence" might persuade people, Ninomiya remarked that those characteristics "cannot persuade birds, beasts, insects, fish, grasses, and trees." Emphasizing the effectiveness of his teaching, Ninomiya observed that if acted upon, it will "make plants grow and prosper, no matter whether the plant is rice, wheat, vegetables, orchids, or chrysanthemums." Ninomiya goes on to reason that while there is an "old saying" which likens sincerity with divine spirits (*shin* 神), it is not incorrect to equate sincerity directly with divine spirits. Concluding, Ninomiya explains that even if one possesses wisdom and learning, without sincerity and real practice, one will not bring things to completion.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup>Quoted from Uchimura Kanzō, "Ninomiya Sontoku – A Peasant Saint," in Tadaatsu Ishiguro, ed., *Ninomiya Sontoku: His Life and "Evening Talks"* (Tokyo: Kenkyūsha, 1955), p. 15.

<sup>14</sup>Hong Ye et al., eds. *Mengzi yinde* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1988), p. 3. The gloss, "working of humaneness" is borrowed from Irene Bloom's translation of this passage in de Bary and Bloom, eds., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Volume One, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, p. 121.

<sup>15</sup>Naramoto and Nakai, eds., *Ninomiya-ō Yawa*, pp. 191-192; Ishiguro, *Ninomiya Sontoku*, pp. 89-90.

The “old saying” that Ninomiya refers to is nothing other than a passage in the *Doctrine of the Mean*. The relevant passage, interestingly, relates “absolute sincerity” to the ability to foreknow. It states:

[Those who follow] the way of utmost sincerity 至誠之道 are able to foreknow (可以前知). When a country 國家 is about to flourish, there are sure to be lucky omens. When a country is about to perish, there are sure to be unlucky omens. These omens are revealed in divination and in the movements of the four limbs... Therefore those who embody utmost sincerity are like divine spirits 故至誠如神.<sup>16</sup>

Rather than likening those who manifest “absolute sincerity” to divine spirits, Ninomiya clearly goes beyond the *Mean* in equating them.

Following the above passage, the *Mean* describes the limitlessness of “utmost sincerity” by stating:

Sincerity is the beginning and end of things 誠者物之終始. If not for sincerity, there would be nothing 不誠無物...Sincerity not only completes the self, it is that by which all things are completed 所以成物也...Utmost sincerity (至誠) is ceaseless (至誠無息)...In its vastness and depth, it matches earth. In its loftiness and luminosity, it matches heaven. In its infinity and eternity, it is unlimited...Within all its vastness, grass and trees grow, birds and beasts dwell, and stores of precious things are discovered...Within its immeasurable depths, dragons, fishes, and turtles are produced and wealth becomes abundant...Only those who embody utmost sincerity can order and adjust the great relations of mankind,

---

<sup>16</sup>*Doctrine of the Mean*, ch. 24. The *Mean* has been translated into English several times. The present translation is adapted from that of Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 108-112. Modern Japanese translations of this ancient Chinese classic include Shimada Kenji 島田虔次, ed., *Daigaku/Chūyō* (ge 下), *Chūgoku kotensen* vol. 7 (Tokyo: Asahi shinbunsha, 1978); and, Uno Tetsuto 宇野哲人, ed., *Chūyō*, *Kodansha gakujutsu bunko* vol. 595 (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1983).

establish the great foundations of humanity, and know the transforming and nourishing operations of heaven and earth.<sup>17</sup>

Ninomiya's allusions to the *Mencius* and *Doctrine of the Mean* reveal how his concerns for the well-being of humanity and the world at large were often articulated in relation to distinctively Confucian texts rather than Buddhist or Shinto writings.

### **The Way of Man and the Way of Nature**

Andō Shōeki's often scathing critiques of Confucianism and other philosophies were the pugnacious half of his own position, advocating the direct and personal involvement of all members of society in the cultivation of grain (*chokkō* 直行). Like Ninomiya, Shōeki's concern was to reinvigorate the agricultural communities suffering tragically from exploitative mismanagement that reduced many to shocking levels of poverty. Unlike Ninomiya however, Shōeki was hardly a supporter of the Tokugawa political order. If anything, he was an agrarian anarchist who believed that if the artificial and inhumane fetters of the political realm were done away with, a natural way of life with its own spontaneous economic system (*shizen shin'eidō* 自然真営道), often described both literally and metaphorically in terms of "the hearth," would emerge, providing the best life for all. Yet Shōeki's idealistic advocacy of a merger with natural processes and the living truth of the agrarian way ultimately, produced little more than a perhaps wonderful utopian vision. When he tried to realize his plans in Akita, where he had been born and raised, his efforts ended in failure.

As if directly aware of Shōeki's claims, and intent on pointedly opposing them, Ninomiya repeatedly endorses "the way of man," i.e., the artificial way that involves purposeful, goal-oriented behavior over appeals to what is natural. While Ninomiya might have heard of Shōeki's thought, it is not very likely since there is virtually no evidence whatsoever of it having achieved any significant circulation during Tokugawa times or thereafter. Rather, the problem that both Shōeki and Ninomiya addressed dates back, in philosophical texts, to late-Zhou 周 (1122-1256 BCE) times

---

<sup>17</sup>*Doctrine of the Mean*, chapters 25-26, 32.

in ancient China.<sup>18</sup> Responding to Daoist criticisms charging that Confucius' thought was not based on the natural way, Mencius explained morality as a natural expression of the four beginnings of ethical awareness rooted in the human mind, and argued at length that human nature was, at birth, morally good. In Mencius' view, if humanity could preserve and follow its natural endowment, ethical goodness would prevail.

A later Confucian, Xunzi 荀子 (ca. 310–238), denied all of this, asserting that human nature was in fact evil at birth, and that it is only by means of sustained artificial effort in the form of self-cultivation through study, learning, and ritual practice that humanity can attain the goodness that it ideally characterizes. Xunzi also asserted, contrary to Mencius' view of heaven as a providential moral force in the world, that heaven was amoral and that its operations could not be fathomed. Rather than try to understand it, the best that people could do was to focus attention on the way of humanity, which was thoroughly artificial, so that they would be prepared, one way or the other, for the vicissitudes of the natural world, such as floods, droughts, etc. While later Song dynasty Neo-Confucians followed the Mencian position, making it part of the very core of Confucian orthodoxy, Xunzi's ideas remained quite well known, though they were most typically cast as a significant heterodoxy.

Ninomiya's position on humanity's relation to the natural world is strikingly similar to Xunzi's. In Xunzi's view:

The operations of heaven are constant. They are not so because of a [sage like] Yao nor are they brought to naught because of a [tyrant like] Jie. Respond to them with good government and there

---

<sup>18</sup> Tetsuo Najita, "The Conceptual Portrayal of Tokugawa Intellectual History," in Najita and Scheiner, eds., *Japanese Thought in the Tokugawa Period, 1600-1868: Methods and Metaphors* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 16. Najita suggests that Ninomiya "received from Ogyū Sorai, Dazai Shundai, and others" his ideas regarding the efficacy of artificial human effort in the creation of wealth. While Sorai and his followers did distinguish the way of nature from the artificial way of humanity, they drew upon Xunzi's ideas too. Sorai even wrote a commentary on the *Xunzi*. Since Ninomiya does not explicitly refer to Sorai or his followers, but does allude closely to Xunzi, it might be that the more remote source was the effective one.

is good fortune. Respond chaotically and misfortune will result. If you encourage agriculture and are frugal in expenditures, then heaven cannot make you poor...If you practice the way and are not duplicitous, then heaven cannot bring you misfortune. Flood or drought cannot make your people starve, extremes of heat or cold cannot make them fall ill...but if you neglect agriculture and spend lavishly, then heaven cannot make you rich...If you turn your back on the way and act rashly, then heaven cannot give you good fortune. Your people will starve even when there are no floods or droughts. They will fall ill even before heat or cold come to oppress them...Yet you should not curse heaven because things develop in this way. Accordingly, the person who can distinguish between the activities of heaven and those of man is worthy to be called the highest type of person.<sup>19</sup>

Unlike earlier Confucians, such as Confucius and Mencius, who viewed heaven as a providential force that would respond to the moral goodness, or lack thereof, of rulers and their people, Xunzi holds that the way of heaven proceeds regardless of the deeds of humanity. Rather than try to fathom heaven or affect its operations, Xunzi held that we can do no better than to focus on the concerns of humanity – farming and frugality – to ensure that whatever heaven brings, we are ready.

Like Xunzi, Ninomiya understood that the efforts of humanity could certainly ensure a fair existence, no matter what heaven and the workings of nature brought. With forethought and effort, people could weather many of the worst natural calamities without extreme suffering.

---

<sup>19</sup> *Xunzi yinde* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), p. 62. Translation adapted from Burton Watson, *Xunzi: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. 79-80. A more recent translation of this classic albeit heterodox work is John Knoblock, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works, 3 vols.*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988-1994). In the first volume of this valuable study, Knoblock includes a chapter within the “Introduction” entitled “Man and Nature” (pp. 67-85) discussing the natural and the artificial realms. The same theme is explored in a book-length translation-study, Edward J. Machle, *Nature and Heaven in the Xunzi: A Study of the Tian Lun* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993).

But Ninomiya makes these points in prose that is far more exaggerated than Xunzi's: he likens "the natural way of the principles of heaven" to "the way of the beasts" (*chikudō* 蓄道) – something, he states, everyone despises. Unlike the beasts, who roam the outdoors weathering the elements without making provisions to shield themselves, people build homes, store food and clothing, and live in an artificial way that is far removed from the dreaded, beast-like way of nature. As much as anything, Ninomiya extols the artificiality of agriculture as one of the most perfect expressions of the way of humanity, since without the purposeful work that makes for farming, there would be no harvest.<sup>20</sup>

### **Ethical Relativism**

A ready advocate of basic Confucian-style work-ethic values such as diligence (*kin* 勤) and frugal living (*ken* 儉), Ninomiya was, surprisingly enough, a skeptic on ethical issues as basic as the existence of good and evil. Few Confucians, indeed, ever questioned the reality of good (*zen* 善) and evil (*aku* 惡), that moral distinction being the most fundamental to their philosophical readiness to evaluate the self, society, and those who govern. Moreover, Confucians typically followed Mencius in affirming, without significant equivocation, that human nature was good at birth. Ninomiya, however, unequivocally advances the opposite, stating:

Discussing good and evil is very difficult to do. If we address the fundamentals here, then we must conclude that there is neither good nor evil. As we distinguish one thing as good, another thing emerges as evil. Originally, good and evil are things established by the partialities (*watakushi* 私) of the human self (*jinshin* 人身). They are entities that [emerge from] the way of humanity. For this reason, if humanity did not exist, there would be neither good nor evil. Because humanity exists, there is subsequently good and evil. Therefore, while some people will deem the reclamation of land as good and the loss of fields to wild overgrowth as evil, swine and wild deer see the former as evil and the latter as good...Thus, it is

---

<sup>20</sup>Ishigurō, *Ninomiya*, pp. 107-108. See Naramoto and Nakai, *Ninomiya-ō yawa*, p. 124.

difficult to distinguish what can be deemed good and what might be judged evil.<sup>21</sup>

Ninomiya's reluctance to recognize good and evil, even if only as ethical leverage relative to injustice, combined with his elevation of "the way of concession" or "deferring" (*jōdō* 譲道), leaves him some distance from the mainstream of Confucian thought, addressing the socio-economic and political issues of the day.

### From Propaganda to the Protestant Ethic

One of the more curious aspects of Maruyama Masao's study of Tokugawa intellectual history is its relative silence regarding Ninomiya, i.e., apart from a lengthy note<sup>22</sup> detailing the relevance of Ninomiya to the thematic framework of Maruyama's study, that of nature and artifice in the development of political modernity in Japan. Given Maruyama's opposition to the ideology of "national morality" (*kokumin dōtoku* 国民道徳) prevalent in the late 1930s through 1945, and the fact that Ninomiya's life-story and thought were incorporated into it, perhaps this is not surprising at all. Regardless of how practical Ninomiya's work with the peasants might have been, and how valuable his thoughts might have been to the wartime agrarian elements, the inclusion of Ninomiya in statements of imperial-nationalistic propaganda such as *Kokutai no hongī* 國體の本義 (Fundamental Principles of Our National Essence, 1937)<sup>23</sup> must have made Ninomiya a less than compelling subject of study for Maruyama.

Viewed from another angle, Ninomiya's emphasis on hard work, industry, purposefulness, and preparedness are relative to the often volatile forces of nature conjured in the mind of Robert Bellah; an expression of a

---

<sup>21</sup>Ishigurō, *Ninomiya*, pp. 126-127. See Naramoto and Nakai, *Ninomiya-ō yawa*, p. 133.

<sup>22</sup>Maruyama, *Studies*, p. 301, note 51. See *Nihon seiji shisōshi kenkyū*, pp. 308-309.

<sup>23</sup>John Owen Gauntlett, trans., and Robert King Hall, ed., *Kokutai no hongī: Cardinal Principles of the National Entity of Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), p. 169. Anon., *Kokutai no Hongī* (Tokyo: Monbusho, 1937). Also see Robert K. Hall, *Shūshin: The Ethics of a Defeated Nation* (New York: Columbia University Teacher's College, 1949), p. 204.

peasant work ethic that could be construed as an analog of the Protestant work ethic.<sup>24</sup> There can be little doubt that Ninomiya's thinking encouraged a work ethic, but whether it led, in any meaningful way, to the development of capitalism is surely open to question. Emphasizing their historical setting, Thomas Havens observes that Ninomiya's teachings fully accommodated and occasionally even catered to the interests of the Tokugawa socio-economic system, without solicitation or early reward. They never broached a word of discontent with the larger political order or to the degree to which it justified exploitation or even oppression of the peasantry.<sup>25</sup>

Considered from this vantage point, the ultimate significance, positive and negative, of Ninomiya's humane and yet politically obliging efforts to address agrarian crises of his day perhaps resides in the extent to which his work not so much encouraged capitalism as it did simple obedience and hard work to make the best of things, whatever they might be, without making absolute ethical claims about the overall value or virtues of the system which precipitated the crises. Ninomiya's popularity, arguably evident in the numerous statues of him carrying firewood and reading a book, the *Daigaku*, was not, in the end, so much an indication of the success of his socio-economic teachings as it was his clear utility as a political example of working hard for the existing order, i.e., being an industrious yet devoted, bent-backed subject.

---

<sup>24</sup>Robert N. Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion: The Cultural Roots of Modern Japan* (New York: The Free Press, 1957), pp. 127-131.

<sup>25</sup>Thomas Havens, *Farm and Nation in Modern Japan: Agrarian Nationalism, 1870-1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 25-27.