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HIST 4738-001 History of Early-Modern Japan

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Part I Question A:

With the arrival of the peaceful Tokugawa period in Japan came a new intellectual flowering. Confucianism, an ideology that originated in China millennia earlier, had long been influential in Japanese thought. Neo-Confucianism, an intellectual offshoot, became particularly popular at the beginning of the 17th Century. Neo-Confucians added spirituality, often based on the native Japanese religion Shinto, and a sense of self-cultivation to the often cold and pragmatic Confucianism. Japanese thinkers such as Hayashi Razan, Yamazaki Ansai, and Kaibara Ekken expanded upon the Neo-Confucian groundwork laid several centuries before. Kaibara, in particular, made Neo-Confucianism accessible to the common people through his numerous writings, but also added significantly to the philosophy (de Bary 108). In his famous book *Taigirokeu*, Kaibara chafes against previous Neo-Confucian thinkers and arrives at a philosophy based centrally on understanding the surrounding world

Kaibara Ekken, while respectful of the Neo-Confucian thinkers that came after Confucius, ultimately views the wisdom of the sages to be far more useful. In his book, *Torigokeu*, He claims that the revival and “resuscitation” of Confucian doctrine under the Song Confucians is certainly admirable, but that “we cannot regard the Song Confucians as equal to Confucius and Mencius” (de Bary 110). Kaibara brings the sages into question in the first place by asserting that without being willing to doubt past teachings, “learning will not be clarified” (de Bary 110). He justifies his disagreement by citing nine differences between previous Neo-Confucians and Confucius and Mencius. These differences emphasize the Daoist and Buddhist influences in previous Neo-

Confucian thought. His rejection of non-Japanese influence relates to a larger contemporary movement taking place at the time – Japanese nativism – which celebrated Shinto while discouraging foreign ideas. Kaibara, in fact, “contributed significantly to Confucianism’s reapproachment with Shinto” (de Bary 107).

Having largely dismissed the Song Confucians, Kaibara emphasizes the teachings of the sages to be the source of truth and moral action. The appeal of this doctrine is quite clear: Tokugawa Japan had just emerged from a period of pronounced and extended civil war, called the warring states period. Confucius wrote the foundation of his philosophy after a civil war in China. Therefore, looking back at Confucius and his immediate followers could be seen as a guide for how to build and maintain a stable political structure.

With Confucius in mind, Kaibara tries to discover the ultimate virtue to inwardly cultivate and practice. He rejects a whole host of Neo-Confucian virtues as “all right,” but not worthy of “primacy” (de Bary 113). Based on Confucius’ teachings, Kaibara chooses loyalty and trustworthiness, which he groups together to form genuineness, as the prime virtue. Genuineness revolves around being true to one’s self, both internally and externally.

Putting the philosophies espoused in *Taigiroku* together with Kaibara’s other writings, the unity in his philosophy becomes clear. Kaibara was also an avid botanist, and his study of the natural world is indicative of his desire to know and understand the fundamental nature of the world. Kaibara was a staunch supporter of education, both of men and women. He even dabbled in western knowledge and education, which was taboo in the Tokugawa period (Lecture: Understanding Tokugawa Confucianism Pt. I 2/3/15). Putting this together with his exaltation of genuineness, his ideology espouses understanding – both of oneself and of the world around him.

The stability of the time period, mixed with his status, certainly influenced Kaibara’s ideology. He was a low ranking samurai with a moderate stipend, which left him fairly comfortable

with his position. Understanding of the world, which was central to his philosophy, is a relatively passive virtue. It involves observing and thinking – but not necessarily changing – which is ideal for someone who does not want to radically change the social order. Similarly, to look back at the sages was to transplant that stability to his time. He does not show a desire to alter the hierarchical society, but he does show a willingness to change how people interact with each other and with themselves.

When compared to other Neo-Confucian scholars, Kaibara appears both anomalous and paradoxical. While staying within the ideas of Neo-Confucianism, he reduces the influence of the Song Confucians, who founded the movement. His ideas are much more consistent with the later “Ancient Studies School” and Ogyu Sorai, who also emphasizes a return to the classics. The paradox of his ideology arises from his insistence on the intellectual superiority of the Chinese sages while simultaneously encouraging Japanese nativism. Overall, the details of Kaibara Ekken’s Neo-Confucianism point to a deeply convoluted, but ultimately pragmatically based, philosophy.

WC: 752 words

Part II question A:

Few early modern Japanese scholars reached the depth and breadth of wisdom achieved by Ogyu Sorai (1666-1728.) Contributing to the Confucian school of thought, Sorai offers a conservative and at times self-contradictory philosophy. He focuses on “The Way,” an abstract Confucian concept that determined how one should live his life. Sorai’s philosophy cannot be separated from the time period in which he lived – the time of the Tokugawa shogunate. This time is characterized by extended peace and rule by a samurai class repurposed as government officials and bureaucrats. Sorai’s writings were therefore circulated mostly among the military class and their families – a fact which becomes quite apparent in his writings. Ogyu Sorai’s Confucian philosophy tirelessly defends the samurai right to rule, and his recommendations for reform ensure that the same group will remain in power.

Before exploring how Sorai’s writings support the military class, it is necessary to understand the complex basis of his philosophy. The foundation of his ideas lies in a conservative view of the past. Like Kaibara Ekken, he sees the Neo-Confucian scholars that came after Confucius as having distorted the original Way, and insists on a return to the Confucian classics (de Bary 219). However, he goes so far as to insist that these classics be read in their original Chinese, rather than in translated Japanese (Lecture: Understanding Tokugawa Confucianism Pt II 2/5/14). He justifies this assertion by claiming that words and phrases have lost their meaning with time, and therefore the works as a whole cannot be understood properly in a modern light. While this attitude is certainly conservative, it also reflects a viewpoint very common in the modern era: that the past must be put in its own context to be understood. The at times paradoxical nature of Sorai’s thought is apparent in this contrast.

Based on the Confucian classics he references, Sorai makes a series of conclusions about sagehood and the physical nature of man. Sorai disagrees sharply with the Neo-Confucian concept that all people can achieve sagehood by self-reflection and other techniques (de Bary 221). He compounds this thought with a recognition that sagehood does not have a simple, constant meaning for all people. In his famous book, *Bendo*, Sorai claims that “physical nature is the Heavenly nature,” meaning that human desires and individual differences cannot be overcome in pursuit of the Way (de Bary 220). It follows that individual talents are central for “personal fulfillment” and the maintenance of the “cooperative community” (de Bary 224). These virtues line up well with the warrior class, whose talent for violence are used to maintain collective order. One of Sorai’s philosophical predecessors, Yamaga Soko, had previously argued that the samurai’s capacity for violence allowed him to uphold “proper moral principles” in his community (Lecture: Understanding Tokugawa Confucianism Pt II 2/5/14). The viewpoints of Yamaga Soko and Sorai put the warriors in a special class with a fundamentally different role from the other classes: the one in charge of the social order. The pedestal on which Sorai places the samurai explains why they would be attracted to his ideas.

Sorai’s criticism on the current hereditary and support for a merit system would seem to be distasteful to the current ruling class, but actually proved quite favorable to the status quo. Sorai argues that the system in its current form led to incompetence on top and unrealized talent on the bottom. He claims that work and “tribulation” are the ultimate origins of merit (de Bary 236). Suggesting that samurai take on more work might seem negative for the samurai, but it actually offered an escape for the perpetually-idle class (Smith 158). Because of the taboo associated with a samurai doing work characteristic of the other three classes, they often felt unfulfilled. Furthermore, Sorai only argues for a merit system within the samurai class, not one for commoners. Therefore, his advocacy for advancement for talented samurai would be taken well among the huge class of lower-

ranking samurai. The very top daimyo among the samurai might take offense at Sorai's assertion of incompetence at the top, but he makes sure to say that talent can be passed down through a family, though it is "exceedingly rare" (Smith 166). An upper-ranking samurai reading Sorai's writings could simply assume that his family is one of the rare, special cases and not take offense. Thus, for either level of samurai, Sorai's arguments could be taken positively, or at least not taken negatively.

Sorai's recommendations for reform on Tokugawa society serve only to enhance the power and prestige of the samurai class. Sorai champions the removal of influence by merchant class on the samurai. He points to the residence of many samurai in Edo, rather than in the countryside, as the source of this problem (de Bary 237). Therefore, he supports putting the samurai back on the land as local lords. This would accomplish his earlier recommendation that the rulers experience more direct work, which would be the case outside of Edo. Sorai also plays into his samurai readers' pride by telling them that resettlement would incur the reverence and love of the peasant classes (de Bary 238). Earning the love of the common people is quite a tempting prospect for a class of bored and uninspired samurai. As a result of his recommended reforms, he sees a much greater differentiation between the ruling samurai class and the common people. He wishes to see a "distinction between the food of the rulers and the ruled" and criticizes Confucian education for the lower classes as unnecessary and dangerous (de Bary 241). In all these points, Sorai creates a philosophical justification for better material conditions for the ruling samurai class, which contributes to his popularity amongst them.

Sorai's political and economic views work to preserve the stability of the Tokugawa state and the status of its rulers, the samurai. He respects the sages and the Way they followed because they "systemized the civilized order," an assertion of the centrality of stability (de Bary 233). Indeed, Sorai asserts that "[the government] too must be revered" (de Bary 233). This insistence power of the rulers earned Sorai the respect of the samurai – the class his philosophy served most.

WC: 1032 words