INTRODUCTION TO
ORIENTAL
CIVILIZATIONS

Wm. Theodore de Bary, EDITOR

Sources of
Japanese Tradition

COMPILED BY
Ryusaku Tsunoda
Wm. Theodore de Bary
Donald Keene

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why foreign teachings have prevailed, and one meets them in street conversations and corner gossip. This is why too our teachings have so declined. False doctrines are rampant, taking advantage of our weakness.

I am an exceedingly ignorant man. What can I claim to know? If, indeed, there is one thing I dare claim for myself some acquaintance, it is the explanation of words. There are many misconceptions about our national writings. The fact that there still seem to be some people aware of them today is probably because the books survive. There are few explanations for the old Japanese words. The fact that one does not hear of anyone who has been thoroughly versant in them must be because the documents and men are insufficient. It has indeed been several hundred years since the old learning was taught. There are only a bare three or four books which offer explanations for the words, and these books vie with one another in claiming to be the authority, advancing new and outlandish theories in support of their claims. Such books are exceedingly superficial; how can they hope to attain the true meanings? If the old words are not understood the old meanings will not be clear. If the old meanings are not clear, the old learning will not revive. The way of the former kings is disappearing; the ideas of the wise men of antiquity have almost been abandoned. The loss will not be a slight one if we fail now to teach philology. We must devote ourselves to this project. I have given my life's energies to the study of the old words. I humbly believe that the rise or fall of Japanese learning depends on whether or not my plan is accepted. I pray that Your Excellency will grant it your attention and consider it favorably.

Your servant Kada submits the above in awe and trepidation.

KAMO MABUCHI

A Study of the Idea of the Nation

Unlike Kada Arumamaro, who presented in ornamental Chinese the petition for the establishment of a school for national learning, Kamo Mabuchi wrote this work in almost pure Japanese. It was composed in 1758. Although this is an attack on Chinese thought, particularly Confucian, it is conceived largely in Taoist terms, and there are numerous direct or indirect references to Lao Tsu. The anti-intellectual, intuitive teachings of Taoism were to prove congenial to later Shinto scholars as well, and in many instances we find in this

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work of Kamo Mabuchi the arguments which Hirata Atsutane and other men were to voice with ever greater interpenetration.

[From Seki Daishi's Zenki, Vol. 54, pp. 2-10; cf. Dumoulin, Monumenta Nipponica, II, 165-92]

Someone remarked to me, "I pay no heed to such petty trifles as Japanese poetry; what interests me is the Chinese Way of governing a nation."

I smiled at this and did not answer. Later, when I met the same man he asked, "You seem to have an opinion on every subject—why did you merely keep smiling when I spoke to you?"

I answered, "You mean when you were talking about the Chinese Confucian teachings or whatever you call them? They are no more than a human invention which reduces the heart of Heaven and Earth to something trivial."

At these words he became enraged. "How dare you call our Great Way trivial?"

I answered, "I would be interested in hearing whether or not the Chinese Confucian learning has actually helped to govern a country successfully." He immediately cited the instances of Yao, Shun, Hsia, Yin, Chou, and so on. I asked if there were no later examples, but he informed me that there were not.

I pursued the matter, asking this time about how far back Chinese traditions went. He answered that thousands of years had passed from Yao's day to the present. I then asked, "Why then did the Way of Yao continue only until the Chou and afterwards cease? I am sure that it is because you restrict yourself to citing events which took place thousands of years ago that the Way seems so good. But those are merely ancient legends. It takes more than such specious ideas to run a country!"

When I said this he grew all the more furious, and ranted on about ancient matters. I said, "You are utterly prejudiced. You say that Yao yielded the throne to that rascal Shun? That sounds as if it must have been a good thing for the country, but that is the sort of thing we avoid in Japan as being 'too good.' In China there were also ruffians who, far from yielding the throne, sprang up from nowhere to kill their sovereigns and seize control of the country. That is what we find 'too bad' and equally avoid. An excess of good can thus lead to excess of evil. [Kamo goes on to cite many other similar instances in Chinese history.]"

1 That is, something which though good in itself can lead to unfortunate consequences,
"Things in China grew more and more chaotic, although in the time of the Emperor Wen of the Han dynasty, there seems to have been a short interval of good government because the Emperor took to heart what Lao Tzu had said. As you can see, whenever some base-born individual appeared to slay his lord and proclaim himself emperor, everyone bowed his head and served this upstart obediently. That is not the worst of it. Although the Chinese despise all foreign countries as 'barbarian,' when someone from one of the 'barbarian' countries became emperor, they all prostrated themselves before him. Wouldn't you say, then, that to despise others as 'barbarian' was irresponsible? It is not a word to be applied indiscriminately.

"Thus, despite the fact that their country has been torn for centuries by disturbances and has never really been well administered, they think that they can explain with their Way of Confucius the principles governing the whole world. Indeed, when one has heard them through, there is nothing to be said: anyone can quickly grasp their doctrines because they consist of mere quibbling. What they value the most and insist on is the establishment and maintenance of good government. Everybody in China would seem to have been in agreement on this point, but belief in it did not in fact lie very deep. It is obvious that many gave superficial assent who did not assent in their hearts. Yet when these principles were introduced to this country it was stated that China had obtained good government through the adoption of them. This was a complete fabrication. I wish it were possible to send to China anyone who clung to such a belief! He would discover like Urashima Tarō when he returned to his home, what an illusion he had been suffering from!

"Japan in ancient days was governed in accordance with the natural laws of Heaven and earth. There was never any indulgence in such petty rationalizing as marked China, but when suddenly these teachings were transmitted here from abroad, they quickly spread, for the men of old in their simplicity took them for the truth. In Japan there had been generation after generation, extending back to the remote past, which had known prosperity, but no sooner were these Confucian teachings propagated here than in the time of Temmu a great rebellion occurred. Later,

6 The hero of a Japanese fairy tale who returns to his village after extraordinary adventures in a dragon's palace to discover, like Rip Van Winkle, that many years have elapsed and he himself is an old man.

6 The Emperor Temmu (633–686) ascended the throne only after a struggle with Prince Ōtsu no Tenkichi, the appointed successor of Tenchi.

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at Nara, the palace, dress, and ceremonies were Chinesified, and every-thing took on a superficial elegance; under the surface, however, contentiousness and dishonesty became more prevalent.

"Confucianism made men crafty, and led them to worship the ruler to such an excessive degree that the whole country acquired a servant's mentality. Later it even came about that an emperor was sacrilegiously driven to an island exile. This occurred because the country had become infected with Chinese ideas. Some people speak ill of Buddhism, but since it is a teaching which makes men stupid, it does not represent a grave evil; after all, rulers do not prosper unless the people are stupid."

"Just as roads are naturally created when people live in uncultivated woodlands or fields, so the Way of the Age of the Gods spontaneously took hold in Japan. Because it was a Way indigenous to the country it caused our emperors to wax increasingly in prosperity. However, the Confucian teachings had not only repeatedly thrown China into disorder, but they now had the same effect in Japan. Yet there are those unwitting of these facts who reverence Confucianism and think that it is the Way to govern the country! This is a deplorable attitude.

"Japanese poetry has as its subject the human heart. It may seem to be of no practical use and just as well left uncomposed, but when one knows poetry well, one understands also without explanation the reasons governing order and disorder in the world. They say that Confucius himself did not reject poetry, but placed the Book of Songs at the head of the classics. Things which are explained in terms of theories are as dead. Those which operate together with Heaven and earth spontaneously are alive and active. I do not mean to say that it is a bad idea to have a general knowledge of all things, but it is a common human failing to tend to lean excessively in that direction. It is advisable not to cling too tenaciously to things once one has learned them. Even though some Japanese poems have as their themes evil desires, the poems do not corrupt the reader's heart, but instead make it more gentle and more understanding of all things.

"When ruling the country a knowledge of Chinese things is of no help in the face of an emergency. In such a situation some man will spontaneously come forth to propose things which are wise and true. In the same way, doctors often study and master Chinese texts, but very seldom..."
do they cure any sickness. On the other hand, medicines which have been transmitted naturally in this country with no reasons or theoretical knowledge behind them, infallibly cure all maladies. It is good when a man spontaneously devotes himself to these things. It is unwise to become obsessed with them. I would like to show people even once what is good in our Way. The fact that the Confucian scholars know very little about government is obvious from the frequent disorders which arise in China whenever the government is left to them. . . .

"It is another bad habit of the Chinese to distinguish men from beasts, by way of self-praise for being men and disparage for the rest. It is like their custom of despising all other countries as 'barbarian,' a meaningless expression. Are not all creatures which live between Heaven and earth so many insects? Why should only man be considered precious? What is so exceptional about man? In China they venerate man as 'the soul of all things' or some such, but I wonder if man should not rather be called 'the most evil of all things'? By this I mean that, just as the sun and moon have not changed, birds, beasts, fish and plants are all exactly as they were in ancient days, but ever since man imputes the idea that knowledge would be of use to him, evil motives of every kind have sprung up among people, and have finally thrown the world into turmoil. Even when they enjoy peaceful rule men deceive one another. It might be desirable if just one or two men in the world had knowledge, but when everyone possesses it, what a dreadful chaos ensues, and in the end the knowledge itself is useless. If one looked through the eyes of a bird or a beast, one would say, 'Man is evil. His ways should not be followed.'"

People also tell me, "We had no writing in this country and therefore had to use Chinese characters. From this one fact you can know everything about the relative importance of our countries." I answer, "I need not recite again how troublesome, evil, turbulent a country China is. To mention just one instance—there is the matter of their picture-writing. There are about 38,000 characters in common use, as someone has determined. . . . Every place name and plant name has a separate character for it which has no other use but to designate that particular place or plant. Can any man, even one who devotes himself to the task earnestly, learn all these many characters? Sometimes people miswrite characters, sometimes the characters themselves change from one generation to the next. What a nuisance, a waste of effort, and a bother! In India, on the other hand, fifty letters suffice for the writing of the more than 5,000 volumes of the Buddhist scriptures. A knowledge of a mere fifty letters permits one to know and transmit innumerable words of past and present alike. This is not simply a matter of writing—the fifty sounds are the sounds of Heaven and earth, and words conceived from them are naturally different from the Chinese characters. Whatever kind of writing we may originally have had, ever since Chinese writing was introduced we have mistakenly become enmeshed in it. Now only the old words, but not their writing are preserved. These words are not identical with the fifty Indian sounds . . . but the fifty sounds suffice to express all words without the nuisance of characters. In Holland, I understand, they use twenty-five letters. In this country there should be fifty. The appearance of letters used in all countries is in general the same, except for China where they invented their bothersome system. . . . The opinion that the characters are precious is not worth discussing further."

What do we know of China in most ancient days? Because the Chinese of later generations invented things, does it follow that here in Japan we too must have invented history? There are bound to be many mistakes in what human minds invent. When we look at things recorded in China by the learned men, we see that the country never profited by any Way unless it was in accord with Heaven and earth. Therefore the sayings of Lao Tzu derived from the Will of Heaven and earth were in consonance with the proper Way of the country. In ancient days China was also a decent country. . . . In ancient times words and things were few. When things are few the heart is sincere, and there is no need for difficult teachings. All will go satisfactorily even without teachings because men are honest. It is true that since men's hearts are manifold there is always some evil in them, but evil itself cannot remain hidden in an honest heart. If it is not hidden, it will not develop into anything serious, but will remain no more than a moment's aberration. Thus, in ancient days though the land was not absolutely devoid of the teachings of good men, a few easy ones sufficed. However, since China is a country of wicked-heartedness, no amount of profound instruction could keep the innate evil
from overwhelming the country, despite the surface appearance. Japan has always been a country where the people are honest. As long as a few teachings were carefully observed and we worked in accordance with the Will of Heaven and earth, the country would be well off without any special instruction. Nevertheless, Chinese doctrines were introduced and corrupted men’s hearts. Even though these teachings resembled those of China itself, they were of the kind which heard in the morning are forgotten by evening. Our country in ancient times was not like that. It obeyed the laws of Heaven and earth. The emperor was the sun and moon and the subjects the stars. If the subjects as stars protect the sun and moon, they will not hide it as is now the case. Just as the sun, moon, and stars have always been in Heaven, so our imperial sun and moon, and the stars his vassals, have existed without change from ancient days, and have ruled the world fairly. However, some knaves appeared, and as a result the emperor is diminished in power, and his subjects too have fallen off. The Age of the Gods is where we may gain a knowledge of this. To discover it, we should carefully examine the words and thoughts in the ancient poetry, and thereby see clearly into the oldest writings.

MOTOORI NORINAGA

The True Tradition of the Sun Goddess

This excerpt is from Motoori’s Precious Comb-box (Tama kushige), the contents of which are meant to “comb” out the snarls of intellectual confusion. In it he upholds the traditional account of the divine creation in all its unembellished simplicity while rejecting the rationalistic cosmogony of the Chinese. The Sun Goddess is a universal deity as well as a national one, but she has shown special favor to the Japanese and guides them to a special destiny.

[From Motoori Norinaga Zenshū, VI, 3-6]

The True Way is one and the same, in every country and throughout heaven and earth. This Way, however, has been correctly transmitted only in our Imperial Land. Its transmission in all foreign countries was lost long ago in early antiquity, and many and varied ways have been expounded, each country representing its own way as the Right Way. But the ways of foreign countries are no more the original Right Way than end-branches of a tree are the same as its root. They may have resemblances here and there to the Right Way, but because the original truth has been corrupted with the passage of time, they can scarcely be likened to the original Right Way. Let me state briefly what that one original Way is. One must understand, first of all, the universal principle of the world. The principle is that Heaven and earth, all the gods and all phenomena, were brought into existence by the creative spirits of two deities—Takami-musubi and Kami-musubi. The birth of all humankind in all ages and the existence of all things and all matter have been the result of that creative spirit. It was the original creativity of these two august deities which caused the deities Izanagi and Izanami to create the land, all kinds of phenomena, and numerous gods and goddesses at the beginning of the Divine Age. This spirit of creativity [musubi, lit. “union”] is a miraculously divine act the reason for which is beyond the comprehension of the human intellect.

But in the foreign countries where the Right Way has not been transmitted this act of divine creativity is not known. Men there have tried to explain the principle of Heaven and earth and all phenomena by such theories as the yin and yang, the hexagrams of the Book of Changes, and the Five Elements. But all of these are fallacious theories stemming from the assumptions of the human intellect and they in no wise represent the true principle.

Izanagi, in deep sorrow at the passing of his goddess, journeyed after her to the land of death. Upon his return to the upper world he bathed himself at Ahagiwara in Tachibana Bay in Tsukushi in order to purify himself of the pollution of the land of death, and while thus cleansing himself, he gave birth to the Heaven-Shining Goddess who by the explicit command of her father-God, came to rule the Heavenly Plain for all time to come. This Heaven-Shining Goddess is none other than the sun in heaven which today casts its gracious light over the world. Then, an Imperial Prince of the Heaven-Shining Goddess was sent down from heaven to the middle kingdom of Ashihara. In the Goddess’ mandate to the Prince at that time it was stated that his dynasty should be coeval with Heaven and earth. It is this mandate which is the very origin and basis of the Way. Thus, all the principles of the world and the way of humankind are represented in the different stages of the Divine Age. Those who seek to know the Right Way must therefore pay careful attention to the