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The Intersection of Politics and Thought in Ryukyuan Confucianism: Sai On's Uses of *Quan*

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IN *One Man's Views* (*Hitori monogatari* 獨物語), the Ryukyuan political reformer Sai On 蔡溫 (1682–1761) wrote, “To encourage the production of large quantities of grain, we permit the sale of distilled liquor,” but, he added, government officials “have the foremost duty to prevent the custom of drunkenness from arising.” Acutely aware of the dilemmas inherent in policy making and government administration, Sai On used a metaphor from the *Classic of Documents* (*Shujing* 書經) to liken the “Way of Government” to “reining a galloping horse with a rotten rope.”¹ Sai On was a

I would like to thank John Henderson, Peter Nosco, Elizabeth Byrd, and the referees for the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay.

This essay deals with works by scholars from China, Ryukyu, and Japan, works written either in some form of Japanese or in classical Chinese. I have adopted the following romanization conventions. In the main text and in the translation of quoted passages, I have romanized certain key Confucian terms, especially *quan* and *jing*, as Chinese, regardless of the language of the original text or individual under consideration. Otherwise, when I provide the exact wording of the original text in brackets, the romanization reflects the language of that text. The romanization of terms peculiar to Ryukyu—such as *shinugu*, *yaadui*, or *yuk-kachu*—reflects the Okinawan language, but the reader should be aware that there is no standard way of romanizing Okinawan and that Okinawan is only one of several languages spoken in the Ryukyu Islands.

¹ Sakihama Shūmei 崎濱秀明, ed., *Sai On zenshū* 蔡溫全集 (Honpō shoseki, 1984) [hereafter SOZS], p. 80. Despite its title, this volume is missing several important works of Sai On, all but one of which have now been found. We can anticipate a new and much improved “zenshū” in the relatively near future.

comparatively rare case of a Confucian scholar who also had a long and successful political career in the highest levels of government. Probably owing to this experience, he was well aware that ideal Confucian norms became blurred in the less-than-ideal world of government administration. Arguing that Ryukyu's difficult and unusual circumstances sometimes required policies running counter to generally accepted Confucian norms, Sai On unified theory and practice by employing the concept of *quan* 權.

Sai On appropriated several key Confucian concepts to lend intellectual support to his political program. For example, he interpreted destiny (*ming* 命) in a way that placed responsibility for Ryukyu's future squarely on the shoulders of Ryukyuan themselves, minimizing the role of external agents. He also employed the concept of material force (*qi* 氣) to provide the metaphysical foundation for an attack on belief in sorcery and other practices he deemed superstitious. This essay focuses on Sai On's uses of *quan*, the central concept in his Confucian thought and practice. His employment of *quan* can be seen both as expanding the possibilities of the Confucian tradition and as going beyond its bounds. It is an excellent example of reinterpreting Confucianism outside of the Chinese political and cultural milieu.

Quan is often translated as "expediency." Through the centuries, however, it has been subjected to a wide variety of interpretations by Confucian and other scholars. The proper translation in any given case, therefore, depends on the particular interpretation at hand. For this reason, I use the Chinese word as is, suggesting possible English renderings as they become relevant.

To understand Sai On's uses of *quan*, some knowledge of the evolution of the concept in Confucian literature prior to his time is essential. Of particular importance are the interpretations of the major Song Confucians, for their views served as the point of departure for Sai On's interpretation. Early Tokugawa-period Japanese writings on *quan* also contributed to Sai On's understanding. Because *quan* is closely connected with specific circumstances, a brief discussion of major issues in Ryukyuan history is also necessary to contextualize Sai On's thought and policies.

QUAN IN CHINESE AND JAPANESE CONFUCIAN THOUGHT

The word *quan* originally meant “steelyard,” “scale,” and “to weigh.”² Later, as a technical term in Confucian thought, it retained a strong sense of these original meanings. *Quan* appears in *Analecets* 9:31, although its precise meaning there is difficult to determine. In *Mencius* 4A:17, a critical interlocutor asks Mencius if a man should reach out his hand to save a drowning sister-in-law even though it is improper for an unrelated man and woman to touch each other. Mencius replies that in such a case a man should of course extend his hand. Doing so, he said, would be an instance of *quan*. Here, *quan* indicates action that violates a particular norm but under unusual circumstances nevertheless produces a morally desirable result. In the dialogue in *Mencius*, *quan* appears in contrast to *li* 禮 (“propriety,” “social norms,” etc.). In most later texts, *quan* typically appears in contrast to *jing* 經 (“standards,” “the standard”). Describing the relationship between *quan* and *jing*, the Han dynasty scholar Zhao Qi 趙岐 (?–201 A.D.) stated, “*Quan* is that which is at variance with *jing* but is still good (*shan* 善).”³ This statement and a nearly identical one from the *Gongyang* 公羊 commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Chronicles* (*Chunqiu* 春秋) became a standard point of departure for later generations of scholars in their discussions of *quan*. There were two broad tendencies in these later discussions: an emphasis on the unity of *quan* and *jing* and an emphasis on their differences.

During the Song dynasty, the topic of *quan* often arose in debates about whether virtue or results should have primacy. *Quan* came up frequently in the context of assessing the actions of famous historical figures like the Duke of Zhou or Duke Huan 桓公 (r. 684–642 B.C.) of Qi 齊.⁴ For our purposes, the most important Song commentators on *quan* are Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107) and Zhu Xi.

² Morohashi Tetsuji 諸橋轍次, *Daikanwa jiten* 大漢和辭典 (Taishūkan, 1959), 6:605.

³ Quoted in Chen Yongjie 陳榮捷 (Wing-tsit Chan), “*Quan*,” in Wei Zhengtong 章政通, ed., *Zhongguo zhexue cidian daquan* 中國哲學辭典大全 (Shuiniu chubanshe, 1989), p. 849. Chen’s article summarizes key philosophical statements in the historical development of *quan* in Chinese thought.

⁴ For an excellent analysis of the Song debates regarding *quan*, *jing*, and related matters, see Hoyt Cleveland Tillman, *Utilitarian Confucianism: Ch’en Liang’s Challenge to Chu Hsi* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1982), pp. 23–67.

Cheng Yi stressed the absolute unity of *quan* and *jing*. He did so to argue against practicing *quan* and to advocate strict adherence to established norms (*jing*). By the Song period, scholars commonly regarded *quan* as action to restore a state of proper equilibrium (*zhong* 中) by doing what is appropriate (*yi* 義) in exceptional circumstances. This formulation is similar to that of the Han dynasty cited above except that *yi* has replaced *shan*. It is common to translate *yi* as “righteousness” and to regard it as norms external to one’s self. This definition of *yi*, however, does not hold for many classical and Neo-Confucian thinkers, for whom *yi* instead suggests a subjective sense of what is appropriate, deriving from each person’s innate sense of goodness.⁵ In the following passage, Cheng saw *yi* as both a subjective view and an integral component of the act of *quan*: “The term *quan* indicates a scale. What sort of thing is *quan*? It is ‘appropriateness’ (*yi*). While it is possible to explain what ‘appropriateness’ is, explaining its metaphysical basis is difficult. It is a matter of each person’s subjective views.”⁶ According to Cheng, the person enacting *quan* enters the realm of subjectivity, unconstrained by external standards (*jing*).

Entering this realm would be fraught with danger, Cheng argued, were anyone other than a sage to perform acts of *quan*. The innate goodness in the mind of a sage is equivalent to the innate goodness in the cosmic pattern (*li* 理) and unobstructed by selfishness and inappropriate emotions; therefore, when a sage practices *quan*, there is no difference between *quan*, *jing*, and *yi*. Sages, however, were extremely rare, at least for Cheng and most of his contemporaries. Were persons of lesser accomplishments to employ *quan*, what would prevent them from acting out of self-interest and rationalizing those acts as “appropriate” (*yi*) instances of *quan*? Would not

⁵ For classical Confucianism, see David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), esp. pp. 89–110. With respect to Zhu Xi’s thought, Wei Cheng-t’ung points out: “Righteousness [*yi*] as the ground for assessing a situation is not an objectively existing norm ready to be followed. Righteousness means appropriateness. It is something that must be decided through one’s innate knowledge (*liang-chih*).” See “Chu Hsi on the Standard and the Expedient,” in Wing-tsit Chan, ed., *Chu Hsi and Neo-Confucianism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), p. 260. In general, “appropriateness” is probably the best translation of *yi*.

⁶ Wang Xiaoyu 王孝魚, ed., *Er Cheng ji* 二程集, 4 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981, 1984), 1:15. 164.

liberal use of *quan* lead to a failure to act in accord with the demands of established ethical standards?

These concerns lay behind Cheng's suspicion of and hostility to any suggestion that *quan* could be distinct from *jing*, a claim he thought would ultimately serve only to rationalize immoral behavior. Summarizing the essence of his view, he stated:

In the past and present, instances of misusing the word *quan* have been numerous. When people say "*quan*," they regard it as deception or an expedient technique. They do not know that *quan* is nothing other than *jing*. It is nothing but weighing lightness and heaviness and being in accord with what is appropriate (*yi*). Therefore, they regard *quan* as inferior to *jing*. But at the instant when it accords with appropriateness, [*quan*] is *jing*.⁷

Subsuming *quan* under *jing*, Cheng criticized those who would see *quan* as an expedient technique that one could legitimately employ without regard for *jing*. One conclusion from Cheng's argument is that one should focus all attention on *jing* without speaking of *quan*. Cheng's hostility to *quan* as expediency is clear from statements like "Those who frequently employ *quan* destroy integrity (*cheng* 誠); those who love good results destroy appropriateness."⁸

Cheng's assertion of the absolute unity of *quan* and *jing* was, according to Zhu Xi, a way of emphasizing the overwhelming importance of *jing*. In *Classified Conversations of Master Zhu* (*Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類), he stated:

It was that he [Cheng] regarded *jing* as terribly important and thus was partial to it (p. 988).

It was simply that he [Cheng] Yichuan, seeing the bias in the Han scholars' one-sided statements that *quan* is what is opposed to *jing*, feared that later generations would be unrestrained, all using expedient measures to suit their own personal purposes. It was only for this reason that he argued as he did (p. 989).⁹

According to Zhu, Cheng had gone too far in collapsing the distinction between *quan* and *jing*, but he had done so for a good reason: to prevent improper use of *quan* and abandonment of *jing*.

Zhu acknowledged a legitimate distinction between *quan* and *jing*. The key difference between his position and Cheng's was a different

⁷ Ibid., 1:15. 234.

⁸ Ibid., 1:15. 318.

⁹ Li Jingde 黎靖德, ed., *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類, 8 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 3.37:988-89.

understanding of *jing*. For Cheng, *jing* was a metaphysical foundation, essentially equivalent with *li* (cosmic pattern). As he explained: “Proper equilibrium (*zhong*) is simply a lack of partiality (*bu pian* 不偏). If there is partiality, it is not proper equilibrium. Harmony (*yong* 庸) is simply constancy (*chang* 常). Likewise, the term ‘proper equilibrium’ is the great equilibrium, and harmony is the fixed cosmic pattern (*dingli* 定理). The fixed cosmic pattern is the unchanging pattern undergirding the world, which is *jing*.”¹⁰ The ontological status of Cheng’s *jing* was such that humans could not possibly modify it.

By contrast, Zhu regarded *jing* as similar to Mencius’s *li* 禮 (propriety, social conventions, etc.).¹¹ In his view, both *jing* and *quan* derived from and were subsumed within the Way (*dao* 道). Although *jing* was not to be taken lightly, qualified persons might temporarily modify it in response to unusual circumstances; this is the process of enacting *quan*. The Way, in other words, penetrated and unified both *quan* and *jing*, constituting them as a polarity. Thus, Zhu could argue that *quan* and *jing* ultimately converged (at the level of the Way) but were not identical.¹²

Although Zhu was willing to admit that deviation from *jing* was acceptable in rare cases, he emphasized that legitimate instances of *quan* were extremely rare. In one conversation with a student, he stated: “Tang’s overthrowing Jie, Wu’s destruction of Zhou, and Yi Yin’s banishing Tai Jia were all cases of *quan*. But were [*quan*] to be used frequently, what sort of world would this become?” The student to whom Zhu made this statement was not entirely convinced. He asked Zhu whether *quan* was the equivalent of proper equilibrium (*zhong*). Zhu responded: “[*quan*] is equilibrium at a particular time. Were it not proper equilibrium, it would not be *quan*. But it was six or seven hundred years after Shun and Yu before there was Tang. After Tang, it was another six or seven hundred years before King Wu.”¹³ In other words, several centuries separated each of these rare historical uses of *quan*, when proper equilibrium was attained by deviating from *jing* (which in this example, referred to

¹⁰ *Er Cheng ji*, 1:15. 160.

¹¹ Wei, “The Standard and the Expedient,” p. 258.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 258, 268.

¹³ *Zhuzi yulei*, 3:37. 990.

obedience or loyalty to one's ruler). At such a rate, even a single legitimate instance of *quan* would be unlikely in one's lifetime.

Donald Munro has characterized Zhu's attitude toward *quan* and *jing* as follows: "It is ironical that Chu Hsi, a Mencian Confucian who believed in innate moral principles, generally prefers that people in any complicated situation do what the *ching* say rather than follow their intuitions. The message for the ordinary person is that one must continue to investigate a lot more things and remove a lot more obstacles before one's intuitions will become clear enough to be reliable."¹⁴ Despite their theoretical differences, in practice, there was much similarity between Zhu and Cheng in their aversion to the enactment of *quan*. The message from both men was to adhere to *jing* and avoid *quan*. To distinguish *quan* from mere expediency, Zhu specified two preconditions for its use: first, circumstances must be such that a morally appropriate (*yi*) result would be impossible by following *jing*; second, the person using *quan* must be a sage or a worthy.¹⁵ Of course, since Zhu linked neither of these preconditions with any objective criteria, they were amenable to wide interpretation. Sai On was much more optimistic about his own sageliness and the potential of other Ryukyans to become sages than had been most Song Confucians of Zhu's time.

Sai On also drew on Japanese treatments of *quan*. In the early Tokugawa period, Nakae Tōju 中江藤樹 (1608–48) and Yamazaki Ansai 山崎闇齋 (1618–82) discussed *quan* at some length, with widely differing views. Nakae's view of *quan* was generally positive; Yamazaki's was negative.

Nakae's most influential work, *Conversations with an Old Man* (*Okina mondō* 翁問答), circulated widely throughout Tokugawa Japan, where it was standard reading for Confucian scholars. Like Zhu, Nakae regarded *jing* not as a permanent, metaphysical foundation, but as the rough equivalent of *li* (Jp. *rei*), "propriety," "ritualized conduct," "social norms," and so forth. Explaining *quan*, Nakae wrote:

Quan is the wondrous instrument (*myōyō* 妙用) of the sages and the all-encompassing

¹⁴ Donald J. Munro, *Images of Human Nature: A Sung Portrait* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 179.

¹⁵ Wei, "The Standard and the Expedient," pp. 262–64.

name for the Divine Way [*shintō* 神道, here *not* referring to any specific religion]. On a large scale, there was Yao's relinquishing his throne and Shun's accepting it, as well as the military campaigns of Tang and Wu. Smaller scale examples start with the Duke of Zhou's taking power and subsequently relinquishing it, include Confucius's reliability and explanatory powers, and extend to every minor word and deed. They are all the Way of *quan*.¹⁶

Significantly departing from both Cheng and Zhu concerning the status of *quan*, Nakae saw it not as an extremely rare and exceptional event, but operational in all aspects of daily moral life large and small. At one point, Nakae explicitly agreed with Cheng Yi about the unity of *quan* and *jing*, stating, "To say that *quan* is that which is opposed to *jing* yet accords with the Way is a grave error that Cheng [Yi] has already set straight."¹⁷ This "agreement," however, was only with the metaphysical point that *quan* and *jing* are identical. From this starting point, Nakae drew precisely the opposite conclusion from Cheng: one should strive to practice *quan* in every aspect of life.

For the purposes of this essay, the best characterization of Nakae's thought is "non-foundational." Unlike Cheng or Zhu, Nakae saw no unchanging substance, pattern, or principle external to one's own mind undergirding the phenomenal world. Nakae saw *quan*, the subjective measure of appropriateness amidst change, as more fundamental than *jing*, which he called fixed "traces" (*ato* 跡) of sagely activity specific to a certain time, place, and set of circumstances. In other words, Nakae, perhaps unknowingly, turned Cheng's formulation on its head, acknowledging the unity of *quan* and *jing* to stress the primacy of *quan*. Although Nakae accepted that not everyone is capable of carrying out *quan* and that some people must therefore rely on *jing* as temporary, expedient devices, he argued that everyone should make *quan* the goal of moral practice: "*Quan* is the wondrous instrument of the sages, and even though novices cannot comprehend it, *quan* should be the goal of their moral effort (*kufū* 工夫)."¹⁸ The ultimate result of this moral effort was a mind so thoroughly integrated with the movement of the cosmos that it reacts perfectly and automatically to the constantly

¹⁶ Yamanoi Yū 山井湧 et al., eds., *Nakae Tōju* 中江藤樹, Nihon shisō taikēi 29 (Iwanami shoten, 1974), p. 136.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 137.

changing circumstances, "like a scale's counterweight having no fixed position, moving back and forth without becoming stuck, measuring the lightness and heaviness of things."¹⁹

Sai On's understanding of *quan* bore many similarities to Nakae's and may even have derived in part from *Conversations with an Old Man*.²⁰ Nakae's conception of *quan*, however, was not dominant among Tokugawa Japanese Confucians. As the Tokugawa political order itself became an established norm, most Japanese scholars tended to view deviation from normative standards—and particularly from the bonds of loyalty to one's lord (*chū* 忠)—with suspicion. Yamazaki Ansai's writings on *quan* were typical of the dominant view. Sharing Cheng and Zhu's unease concerning the use of *quan*, Yamazaki stated: "In the Way under heaven, there is *jing* and *quan*. *Jing* is the constant Way for all ages to which all people can adhere. *Quan* is something of temporary utility that cannot be employed by anyone who is not a sage or worthy. Zhu Xi said, 'Tang's overthrowing Jie, Wu's destruction of Zhou and Yi Yin's banishing Tai Jia were all cases of *quan*, but were [*quan*] to be used frequently, what sort of world would this become?' "²¹ The great contrast between Nakae's and Yamazaki's understanding of *quan* is an example of the range of meanings the term was capable of expressing by the seventeenth century.

THE RYUKYU KINGDOM: PRECARIOUSLY BALANCED
BETWEEN CHINA AND JAPAN

"Our country, with its meager strength and resources, has obligations to both China and Japan, which we lack the means to carry

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 136

²⁰ Sai On's major philosophical essay, *Conversations with a Rustic Old Man* 養翁片言, which has essentially the same title as Nakae's major work and addresses many of the same issues, is sufficiently similar in ways to suggest Sai On had read Nakae and was in part reacting to him. In the years following completion of *Conversations with an Old Man*, Nakae's thought drew steadily closer to that of Wang Yangming (1472–1529) and his followers. Certain aspects of Sai On's thought also resemble Wang, and I explore the possible connections between Sai On and Wang Yangming in an upcoming article. See Gregory J. Smits グレゴリ J スミッツ, "Sai On no gakutō to shisō: toku ni Bukkyō, Shaka ron o chūshin to shite" 蔡溫の學統と思想—特に佛教, 釋迦論を中心として, forthcoming in *Okinawa bunka kenkyū*.

²¹ "Heki'i" 關異, in Abe Yoshio 阿部吉雄 et al., eds., *Chōsen no shushigaku; Nihon no shushigaku (jō)* 朝鮮の朱子學, 日本の朱子學(上), Shushigaku taikai 12 (Meitoku shuppansha, 1977), p. 148.

out,” said Sai On in the opening sentence of *One Man’s Views*. Perhaps slightly exaggerating Ryukyu’s poverty to make a point, the statement is nevertheless a concise summary of a difficulty facing all of Ryukyu’s leaders from the early seventeenth century onward: providing for the material well-being of state and society. Since the mid-sixteenth century, Ryukyu’s relationship with Japan—or more precisely, with certain political and military entities within Japan—had been tense. In 1609, the powerful southernmost domain of Satsuma 薩摩, with bakufu approval, successfully invaded Ryukyu. The bakufu’s primary motive in allowing the invasion was to use Ryukyu as a link with China. Twice the bakufu had attempted and failed to formalize a trade agreement with the Ming court. Likewise valuing Ryukyu as a link to China, Satsuma hoped to reap substantial profits from the kingdom’s tribute trade by obtaining scarce Chinese goods from Ryukyu to sell in Japanese markets.

Since 1372, Ryukyu had regularly participated in tributary relations with the Chinese court. By the early sixteenth century, it had grown wealthy by handling trade between its larger Asian neighbors, with Ryukyuan ships sailing as far afield as India. By the end of the sixteenth century, Ryukyu’s share of this trade had greatly diminished owing to competition from Spanish, Portuguese, and Japanese merchants. Ryukyu was already in economic decline at the time of Satsuma’s invasion, and continued to decline for approximately six decades thereafter. Initially, Satsuma did not profit from Ryukyu’s trade with China. Satsuma had to provide capital to the impoverished kingdom, and Ryukyuan at all social levels offered extensive passive resistance to its attempts to profit from their labor and skills. Although Satsuma tried to force the Ryukyuan into line, it was not until the late sixteenth century, when the domain established significant financial incentives for Ryukyuan cooperation, that it finally began to profit from Ryukyu’s China trade.

The fall of the Ming was a boon for Ryukyu. For nearly a century after the Qing takeover, bakufu officials worried that the Qing might take military action against Japan. Fearing that Ryukyu might become a point of conflict with the Qing empire, the bakufu

²² SOZS, p. 76.

pressured Satsuma to minimize its direct presence in Ryukyu, to minimize Japanese cultural influence in the islands, and to allow the Ryukyuan king and his officials to administer their internal affairs. Ryukyu, while still politically subordinate to the bakufu and Satsuma, took on the appearance of a fully independent state.

In its ambiguous status as a quasi-independent state, Ryukyu was useful to both Satsuma and the bakufu as a source of information about China. This information was especially valuable to the bakufu, which lacked formal trade and diplomatic relations with the Qing court. Unlike the bakufu, Ryukyu maintained a trading center in Fuzhou and sent periodic embassies to Beijing. Its ambassadors, being conversant in the spoken language of Chinese officialdom (*guanhua* 官話), were in an excellent position to obtain information of interest to the bakufu.

Satsuma sought to control this information and use it for the domain's benefit. Starting in 1678, whenever a Ryukyuan embassy returned from China, it sent an envoy to Satsuma to make a report to the domain's China specialists. Relying mainly on data from Ryukyu, Satsuma established an agency, the Tōgakuho 唐學方, to collect and study information concerning China. Satsuma was thus in the enviable position of controlling whether its findings should be passed on to the bakufu or withheld. On several occasions, Satsuma transmitted bakufu requests to the Ryukyuan court for information on Qing military equipment.²³

The *daimyō* of Satsuma, playing upon bakufu apprehension over Qing military strength, used his control of Ryukyu to enhance Satsuma's prestige within Japan. Shimazu Yoshitaka 島津吉貴 successfully used this tactic in 1710 to win an increase in court rank: he began by asserting that Ryukyu ranked second only to Korea among China's tributary states; he then argued that, because the king of Ryukyu was also a vassal of Shimazu's, the elevation in court rank and prestige would strengthen his hand in dealing with Ryukyu;

²³ For a listing of these requests, as well as a detailed analysis of Ryukyu as an information exporter to Japan, see Machira Fusaaki 眞榮平房昭, "Kinsei Nihon ni okeru kaigai jōhō to Ryūkyū no ichi" 近世日本における海外情報と琉球の位置, *Shisō* 思想 796 (October, 1990): esp. pp. 74-75. Ronald Toby discusses this and other aspects of Ryukyu's relations with Japan in *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia and the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), esp. pp. 140-67.

finally, playing to bakufu apprehensions, Shimazu argued that his firm control over Ryukyu was essential lest Ryukyu join forces with the Qing court to oppose Japan.²⁴

Relations between Ryukyu, Southeast coastal China, Beijing, Satsuma, and the bakufu, particularly in the economic realm, were complex, often more so than the relatively straightforward examples discussed above indicate. Furthermore, Ryukyu was not merely a passive pawn in the maneuverings of its more powerful neighbors. By necessity, if not always by choice, Ryukyuan officials often faced difficult decisions. One example concerned dealing with the Revolt of the Three Feudatories, when Geng Jingzhong 耿精忠 and Jing Nanwang 靖南王 seized control of Fujian and Zhejiang provinces and dispatched, in 1676, Chen Yingchang 陳應昌 to Ryukyu. Chen demanded sulfur, an item the Ryukyuan court traditionally had presented to the Ming dynasty as tribute. The king and his advisors knew that presenting sulfur to Chen was tantamount to recognizing the anti-Qing rebels Geng and Jing as the legitimate rulers of the Fujian-Zhejiang area. To refuse Chen would endanger future ties with China should the anti-Manchu forces prevail; to present the sulfur entailed the same risk should the Qing court regain control of the area. In a quandary, Satsuma's representative in Ryukyu provided no guidance. The Ryukyuan court nervously decided to accede to Chen's demands.

When Chen departed Ryukyu, the court appointed the kingdom's foremost China expert, Sai Kokki 蔡國器 (1632–1702) to set sail for Fuzhou to investigate the situation. Sai asked the Ryukyuan court to create two sets of official documents, one congratulating the anti-Qing rebels on their glorious victory, the other satisfying the requirements of diplomatic relations with the Qing court. Upon arriving at Fuzhou in 1677, Sai quickly ascertained that Qing forces had suppressed the rebellion. He thereupon burned the set of documents congratulating the rebels and carried on as if Ryukyu had never doubted Qing control.

Meanwhile, the Qing court had captured Chen, knew that he had gone to Ryukyu, and had heard from him of Ryukyu's pledge of

²⁴ Kamiya Nobuyuki 紙屋敦之, "Edo nobori" 江戸上り, *Shin Ryūkyūshi: kinsei hen (jō)* 新琉球史—近世編(上) (Naha: Ryūkyū shinpōsha, 1990), pp. 18–19.

support for the rebel cause. When Qing officials questioned Sai about the matter, he lied, saying not only that the Ryukyuan court had rejected Chen's demands but also that it had refused to accept Chen as a legitimate envoy. To support his claim, Sai presented the Qing court with the diplomatic correspondence he had brought from Ryukyu. These documents convinced the Qing court of Ryukyu's loyalty, which Qing officials explicitly praised.²⁵ Sai's bold diplomacy ended up strengthening Ryukyu's ties with China amidst circumstances in which the slightest error could have had grave consequences.

After Satsuma's invasion, Ryukyu's continued existence as a quasi-independent kingdom depended on its ability to maintain good relations with China during a time when Japan (the bakufu) and China had no official diplomatic relations. To maintain close ties with China, Ryukyu had to keep its true relationship with Japan hidden from Chinese eyes, which it went to great lengths to do. Any significant realignment in East Asian diplomatic relations had the potential to place the small island kingdom in danger. It was in fluid contexts such as this, that Sai On stressed the importance of *quan* for Ryukyu's survival. The diplomacy of Sai Kokki described above is a prime example of the need for situational weighing (*quan*) within a rapidly changing environment. Sai Kokki certainly deviated from established norms, but, from Ryukyu's standpoint, his deviation led to the re-establishment of proper equilibrium.

Nakae Tōju and Sai On stressed the primacy of *quan* in their writings. Nakae, however, lived a quiet, rural life as an ex-samurai of low standing turned small-scale *sake* merchant. Although he faced occasional moral dilemmas in his personal life, Nakae had no opportunity to practice *quan* on a larger scale. For Sai On, *quan* was less as a matter of theory than an essential tool in the struggle for his kingdom's survival. As Ryukyu's foremost politician, his practice of *quan* had consequences that extended well beyond his personal moral life.

²⁵ This incident is well known among historians of Ryukyu. For a concise summary, see "Sai Kokki" in Okinawa daihyakka jiten kankō jimukyoku, eds., *Okinawa daihyakka jiten* 沖縄大百科事典 (Naha: Okinawa Taimususha, 1983), 2:173.

SAI ON'S CONCEPTION AND USES OF *QUAN*

Sai On's political career began in 1711, when he became tutor to Crown Prince Shō Kei 尚敬 (r. 1712–1752). By developing a close relationship with Shō Kei, Sai On rose quickly through the ranks of upper officials. By the time he joined Ryukyu's highest governing body, the Council of Three (*Sanshikan* 三司官), in 1728, Sai On had become the kingdom's de facto leader. Even at the height of his power, however, Sai On was never a dictator, and he faced various forms of political opposition throughout his career. His writing and policies point to an overall goal: to ensure the long-term survival of the royal house—namely, of Ryukyu as a kingdom. Pursuant to this goal, he and his supporters substantially altered the ideological and ceremonial basis of the state, shifting from rites derived from Japanese and Buddhist examples to rites based on Chinese and Confucian practices.²⁶ Through ritual forms, administrative reform, law and economic policy, Sai On attempted to create a Confucian society in Ryukyu from the top down.

In their attempt to Confucianize Ryukyu, Sai On and his supporters sought to standardize society in many ways. Under Sai On, Ryukyu's government conducted extensive land surveys and set up a complex forest management system. The central government issued detailed administrative handbooks to local officials in each district and subjected local festivals and religious practices to critical scrutiny. After Sai On became a member of the Council of Three, the central government banned, among other practices, shamanism and nude dancing (*shinugu*) by female religious practitioners (*yuta* and *nuru*). It hoped thereby to increase productivity and instill basic Confucian moral values. In the late eighteenth century, the court issued new, comprehensive law codes, the provisions of which reflected Sai On's Confucian values. One example concerned the crime of sorcery, for which women in the seventeenth century had been commonly tried and executed. Law codes written during Sai On's administration, however, explicitly doubted that sorcery was possible in all but the most unusual cases and urged extreme skepticism by

²⁶ For an analysis of this change, see Tomiyama Kazuyuki 豊見山和行, "Ryūkyū no ōken girei: saiten girei to sūbyō saishi o chūshin ni" 祭天儀禮と宗廟祭祀を中心に, in Akasaka Norio 赤坂憲雄, ed., *Ōken no kisō e* 王權の基層へ (Shinyōsha, 1992), pp. 188–224.

investigating officials. Court ranks, ceremonial, styles of dress for the Ryukyuan aristocracy (*yukkachu* 良人), regulations regarding household inheritance and legitimacy, and a host of other matters were revised and standardized by government decree. In many of these cases, Sai On directly carried out or supervised the relevant project, and in all cases the new standards reflected Confucian ethics or ceremonial forms. *Jing*, in other words, was important for Sai On and in various forms absorbed most of his time and energy.

While using the coercive power of the state to recast Ryukyuan society according to Confucian ideals, Sai On also realized that, for creating a viable Confucian society, the kingdom's top officials should be flexible. *Quan*, he argued, should be a normal part of governing. In *Essentials of Governance* (*Tuzhi yaochuan* 圖治要傳), he stated:

It is essential for those who govern a country to ponder *jing* and *quan*. . . . It is essential that those charged with a country's governance give priority to pondering adaptation to change. A country that can adapt to good and bad, fortune and misfortune, and the echoes from eight directions²⁷ thereby avoiding harm, is called peaceful and stable. If officials carry out their duty by engaging in routine work without thought of adaptation, then I fear an infinitesimal misalignment will lead to a grave error of a thousand miles.²⁸

Sai On's interpretation of *quan* was closely linked with his understanding of *jing*. Defining *jing* in the context of government administration as "action informed by past examples,"²⁹ Sai On did not regard it as forming or deriving from a metaphysical foundation. Instead, Sai On's *jing* suggests bureaucratic routine and complacency, as opposed to innovation and initiative. A major reason Sai On saw *quan* in the realm of government administration in a positive light was his understanding of change.

Like many Confucians of his day, Sai On believed that change was an inevitable fact of nature, built into the cosmic pattern. Therefore, the overall goal of those who govern a country should be to create stability amidst incessant change. The same reasoning applied to heads of households, and like most Confucians, Sai On saw the

²⁷ *Xiangying bafang* 響應八方 was a common classical Chinese metaphor indicating an immediate response to the actions of others. The entire phrase, therefore, indicates rapid response to a wide variety of external changes.

²⁸ SOZS, pp. 126–27.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 126.

country as a household writ large. In *Expeditious Household Management* (*Jika shōkei* 治家捷經) in conjunction with a diagram entitled “Complete Diagram of Making One’s Way Through the World” (fig. 1), he described change as follows:

The general cycle of heavenly transformation makes a complete round every ten years. The prosperity or decline of humans also changes once every ten or twenty years, and all know that [a certain degree of prosperity] is not a fixed constant. Many are those who, though prospering, fail to make long-term plans, with the result that their households are destroyed and they have no legacy to pass down. For this reason, the superior person (*kunshi* 君子) admonishes himself when he prospers, ponders long-term plans, and preserves his wealth. To have regrets after one has already declined is certainly of no value whatsoever.³⁰

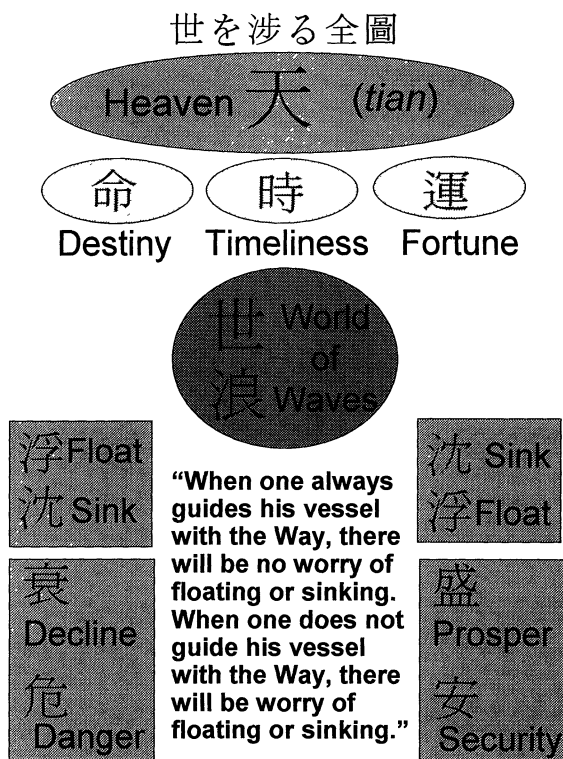


Fig. 1. Complete Diagram of Making One’s Way Through the World

³⁰ Ibid., p. 194.

Expanding on this basic assertion, Sai On likened the human world to waves, and human endeavors to boats. "Not even a sage," he said, "can avoid the world of waves." Ordinary, unenlightened people fail to cultivate their virtue when things appear to be going well. They "overturn the ship of their person, the ship of their household, the ship of their country, or the ship of the world."³¹ In contrast, a sage keeps his boat afloat in changing, unpredictable seas.

Complacency was an enemy of individuals, households, and states. In *Conversations with a Rustic Old Man*, a lively philosophical essay in which Sai On speaks through the conversations of a fictional "old man," one passage begins with a description of several brothers from a prominent household. The brothers were wearing the finest clothes while riding a well-fed horse, "meandering around with a look of pride on their faces." The old man declares their actions "dangerous." A passerby remarks that he sees nothing particularly dangerous in the wealthy enjoying what they have. The old man then takes the passerby to task:

You! Shut up and listen! It is exceedingly difficult in this world to build up any of its myriad things and exceedingly easy to tear them down. Surely the founders of a prominent household put forth their fullest effort, gradually building up accomplishments and trust to create a prosperous household. Their effort was exceedingly great; their reputations extremely high. How in the world could their descendants borrow their ancestors' hard-earned wealth, take a liking to luxurious living, and "work" at amusing themselves? *Circumstances change easily with the passing of time, and that which the cosmos has decreed (tianming 天命) is never constant.* If their amusing themselves is not dangerous, what is it? Yet you look upon them favorably. If your false views are not dangerous, what are they?³²

To be complacent when circumstances appear favorable will guarantee decline when those circumstances change. For Sai On, failure to anticipate and adapt to change was the greatest obstacle to a prosperous Ryukyu—or to the prosperity of any other society.

Sai On repeatedly urged that government officials at all levels should plan for possible emergencies and heads of households should set aside a portion of their wealth as savings. High officials, he said, must develop the clarity of mind to detect when changes in conditions are about to take place, before ordinary people would

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., p. 32. Italics added.

notice: “To govern a country well, it is necessary to recognize prosperity and decline before they become manifest and to determine safety or danger prior to arriving at that point. This is called long-term planning and is also called planning for what has not yet taken shape.”³³ This passage from *Essentials of Governance* occurs in a section describing the duties of high-ranking officials and directly follows the discussion of *quan* and *jing* in governing a country quoted previously.

Sai On explicitly stated that to carry out *quan* one must be a sage, and his theoretical conception of *quan* at the level of metaphysics was nearly identical with that of Zhu Xi.³⁴ Furthermore, Sai On’s expectation that government officials have the clarity of mind to anticipate changes when they are on the verge of taking place suggests their possessing a high level of moral refinement. In other contexts, Sai On repeatedly affirmed the power of human will and action vis-à-vis destiny (*ming* 命) or cosmic forces (*tian* 天).³⁵ Although frequently lamenting the benighted moral and intellectual condition of the common people, Sai On maintained that, through study, even ordinary Ryukyuan could transform themselves into sages and worthies: “If they could be motivated to think deeply about what would benefit the country, the true ability of their heavenly natures would manifest itself in response to specific circumstances. If we study the Way of Government and nurture this true ability, why should present-day people have cause to agonize in the least over not being on a par with the ancients?”³⁶ Sai On was considerably more optimistic about Ryukyuan becoming sages than were many Chinese or Japanese Confucians concerning the members of their own societies. This optimism was closely connected with his advocacy of the use of *quan*.

According to Sai On, Ryukyu’s precarious political status and its poverty called for the exercise of *quan*. Rigorous moral training and

³³ Ibid., p. 127.

³⁴ See *ibid.*, p. 64.

³⁵ For example: “Although rise and fall, existence or demise may seem to be dependent on *ming* (destiny, fate), in reality it depends on people, not *tian*. Thus the sages bequeathed teachings to all ages based on the principle that the power of human beings is greater than that of *tian*. Could these writings possibly be incorrect?” (*Ibid.*, p. 128).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

study, he said, would produce sages and worthies in a single generation to staff Ryukyu's officialdom. In the context of a discussion of household education, Sai On maintained that basic training for young males should include education about *quan*: "[A young adult and his teacher] must discuss and investigate stability and rebellion and the waxing and waning of proper teachings of governance. They must also study the principle underlying changes in prosperity and decline, the tendencies of the times (*jisei* 時勢), and the goodness of *jing* and *quan*."³⁷ Again Sai On links *quan* with governing, movement, and change. In contrast with Cheng Yi, Zhu Xi, and Yamazaki Ansai, Sai On regarded *quan* as a normal part of proper government, at least for Ryukyu.

Cheng, Zhu, Yamazaki, and nearly all other Confucians acknowledged that change was built into the pattern of the cosmos, but they did not link this fact with *quan*. Presumably *jing* would be adequate to deal with change in all but the most unusual instances. For Nakae Tōju and Sai On, however, because incessant change was built into the workings of the cosmos, one had to master *quan* to be in harmony with the change, that is, to be a sage. Taking the optimistic view that everyone could become a sage with proper education, Sai On maintained that *jing*, while a key element in social stability, more closely resembled temporary expedient measures than did *quan*, the sagely norm. Thus, like Nakae, Sai On reversed the classic roles of *jing* and *quan*.

Unlike Nakae, Sai On actually practiced *quan* as a high-ranking government official charged with major policy decisions. His writings may be divided into two broad categories. The majority were essays explaining general principles. In these works, Sai On frequently wrote about *quan*. The second category consisted of handbooks specific to Ryukyu. These works included agricultural manuals, administrative and ritual handbooks, and the important essay *One Man's Views*, in which the retired Sai On drew on his policies and accomplishments in office to outline a comprehensive agenda for Ryukyuan officials. Written in Japanese (*sōrōbun* 候文) and in straightforward terms for a broad audience, *One Man's Views* avoids complex terminology such as *quan*. Nevertheless, it is evident that

³⁷ Ibid., p. 165.

Sai On consciously pursued policies that would be difficult to defend except as instances of *quan*. Perhaps the clearest example is his view of prostitution in the port of Naha.

Generally, Sai On took a dim view of prostitution. In the countryside, the practice was a potential distraction from the urgent business of agricultural production and a drain on precious economic resources. Among the aristocracy, the main patrons of prostitutes, the practice disrupted legitimate lines of descent in households. It also prevented the government from maintaining records clearly demarcating the boundary between aristocrats and commoners. Sai On frequently spoke of sexual passion as a hindrance to moral cultivation and the proper performance of official duties, a problem worsened by prostitution. Above all, he was concerned with the problem of legitimacy. After Sai On joined the Council of Three, government directives prohibited any offspring of prostitutes from becoming household heirs. One guidebook, issued in 1730, stated, “Because entering children born of prostitutes into [a household register’s official] line of succession wreaks havoc on the basis of ethics, it is never to be done.”³⁸ Government policy since the late seventeenth century limited prostitution to certain designated areas in Naha and strictly forbade prostitution in the countryside.

Sai On did not, however, favor any attempt to ban the prostitution in Naha, Ryukyu’s most populous center. As he explained:

Regarding prostitutes, their behavior can be seen as a hindrance to ethics and a severe obstacle to carrying out the Way of Government. As for Naha, however, since it is a port where various ships congregate, if no prostitutes are placed there, I am afraid that all sorts of problems might develop. Therefore, thinking the matter over, [I have concluded that] the placing of prostitutes in Naha—[a practice] since former times—can actually be considered to promote carrying out the Way of Government. This point of view should receive ample consideration.³⁹

Although Sai On does not explicitly label his policy towards prostitution “*quan*,” it is clearly that. The establishment of brothels in Naha ran counter to the government’s general stance that prostitution was detrimental to morality and the social order. In the case of

³⁸ Okinawa kenritsu toshokan shiryō henshūshitsu 沖縄県立図書館史料編集室, eds., *Okinawa ken shiryō* 沖縄県史料, Zen-kindai 6, Shuri ōfu shioki 2 (Naha: Okinawa ken kyōiku iinkai, 1989), p. 54.

³⁹ *SOZS*, p. 83.

Naha, however, there were extraordinary circumstances: the “various ships.”

These ships, of course, often arrived from China or Japan. Early in Sai On's career, he dealt with a riot by Chinese merchants, who, as part of an investiture embassy from Beijing, were temporarily residing in Naha. Although connected with money, not prostitution, the riot might have seriously damaged Ryukyu's relationship with China. Ryukyu's precarious existence between its two large neighbors made Sai On and his readers well aware of the potential danger from unruly Chinese or Japanese sailors. By condoning limited prostitution in the main seaport, the Ryukyuan government would prevent “all sorts of problems” that might otherwise develop. Allowing prostitution promoted the greater good—amicable relations with potentially disruptive Chinese and Japanese visitors—and thus furthered the “Way of Government.” The policy of the Ryukyuan government regarding prostitution was clearly at variance with *jing*, but it nevertheless accorded with what was appropriate, helping to maintain proper equilibrium under unusual circumstances.

Another significant example of deviation from accepted norms to achieve an appropriate result concerns aristocratic unemployment. For reasons that need not concern us here, unemployment and underemployment among members of the official aristocratic class (hereafter, *yukkachu*) had become a major problem by Sai On's time. Like other Ryukyuans, he regarded the proper occupation of *yukkachu* to be government officials, at least under normal circumstances. It was the common people who should fill the ranks of peasants, artisans, merchants, and other “ordinary” occupations, as Sai On, paraphrasing Mencius, stated: “Those above should work with their minds, while those below should labor with their physical strength. This situation is the natural Way of the cosmos.”⁴⁰ Based on Confucian-inspired notions of what is “natural,” seventeenth-century regulations prohibited *yukkachu* from working at commoner occupations. Violators risked permanent loss of aristocratic status.

By 1712, the number of *yukkachu* had grown to the point that

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 115.

many could not support themselves through officially recognized occupations. Such *yukkachu* sank into poverty and had to get by on the labor of their wives, who slipped away to the marketplace to engage in commerce. In such extreme circumstances, adherence to conventional norms became impossible. Even before Sai On became a member of the Council of Three, Ryukyu's government had begun to relax some of the restrictions on *yukkachu* occupations. One change in 1718 allowed individual *yukkachu* to work at a limited range of commoner occupations without loss of status for their household as a whole. The name of the person thus employed, however, was not allowed entry into the household's genealogical record. As Dana Masayuki points out, the numerous blanks in the genealogical records from this time indicate that many *yukkachu* probably did engage in commoner occupations.⁴¹ New regulations in 1725, the year Sai On joined the Council of Three, further relaxed this policy. The revised rules allowed *yukkachu* to work at nearly all commoner occupations (with a few exceptions such as pig butcher) without even individual loss of aristocratic status.

Sai On went beyond merely relaxing previous restrictions. He actively encouraged unemployed *yukkachu* to take up commoner occupations, and he attacked aristocratic unemployment from two directions. First, he pursued a number of policies to expand Ryukyu's economy, thus creating more jobs. As the following passage from *One Man's Views* suggests, Sai On understood that the elimination of taxes would benefit merchants:

In the past, four or five *kanme* 貫目 of silver was collected as a tax on merchants, but merchants were unable to do business as they desired and commerce gradually declined. Twenty years ago, the tax was removed, and merchants were told to work as they wanted. This policy encouraged merchants, and the number of people engaged in trades has increased and expanded. Indeed, in conjunction with those whose hands are skilled at crafts, various products are made and sold, and needless to say, this flourishing of trades is good and a great treasure for society.⁴²

Other measures included the removal of restrictions governing the number of people permitted to engage in certain occupations, promoting the reclamation and cost-effective use of marginal or waste

⁴¹ Dana Masayuki 田名眞之, "Mibunsei: shi to nō" 身分制—士と農, *Shin Ryūkyūshi: kin-sei hen* (jō) (Naha: Ryūkyū shinpōsha, 1990), p. 51.

⁴² *SOZS*, p. 80.

lands, and the creation of a timber industry under government supervision.

Second, while working to create more jobs, Sai On exhorted unemployed *yukkachu* to avail themselves of those jobs. Although his philosophical essays describe an ideal world in which aristocrats govern in official capacities, Sai On's message in handbooks and other works intended for wider audiences was different. In *Articles of Instruction* (*Go-kyōjō* 御教條), a collection of moral directives with the force of law, he defined the essence of being a *yukkachu* not by occupation but by personal moral status:

There are very few administrative posts available in this country, and the number of *yukkachu* increases every year. So there are many [*yukkachu*] who cannot serve in an official capacity. *Yukkachu*, however, are of conspicuously different pedigree than commoners. If we keep this point in mind, then *yukkachu*, while always contemplating a mind of loyalty and duty, faithfully strive in every way to be concerned with the country's customs and morality. This is public service not to be taken lightly.⁴³

Yukkachu, in other words, serve, or should serve, as moral exemplars for the rest of society regardless of occupation.

After defining aristocratic status apart from occupation, Sai On encouraged unemployed *yukkachu* to engage in constructive work. He urged them to work without resentment, even if they had to take up occupations associated with commoners:

The various craftsmen and those who operate shops are all engaged in making a living. All things considered, however, this work is also useful for the country. This being the case, even *yukkachu* who work at crafts or distribute goods through a shop are doing work that benefits the country. Such work, therefore, is public service and is nothing to be bitter about. . . . The various *yukkachu*, along with the commoners, produce goods that benefit the country whatever they may be.⁴⁴

In addition to endorsing *yukkachu* working as merchants and craftsmen, Sai On set up a fund (by levying a small tax on the stipends of government officials) to provide one-time payments to help unemployed *yukkachu* get started in business.

While helpful, these efforts proved inadequate because urban occupations of any kind remained insufficient for all the unemployed

⁴³ Ibid., p. 17.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 18.

yukkachu. The only other option was agriculture. This was particularly attractive to Sai On because agricultural production at the time was suffering from a manpower shortage. He therefore launched an ambitious program, called *yaadui* 屋取, to create agricultural villages of *yukkachu* throughout Okinawa. The program involved the government contracting with local peasants to make land available to *yukkachu*. The *yaadui* land was typically of poor quality, and peasants were usually happy to concentrate their labor on better land. *Yukkachu* paid no taxes on *yaadui* land and lived in villages populated only by other *yukkachu*.⁴⁵

The *yukkachu* thus employed viewed their agricultural work as temporary. They universally expressed dislike for the difficult and, in their eyes, demeaning labor of the fields and sought the earliest possible return to urban life. The central government, too, saw *yaadui* as a temporary expedient to allow impoverished *yukkachu* to get back on their feet. *Yukkachu* in *yaadui* villages were free to return to Shuri at any time. The poverty that drove them out of the capital in the first place, however, rarely allowed them to return. In fact, the number of *yaadui* villages increased throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These farmer-*yukkachu* rarely interacted with the commoner farmers of nearby areas. So strong was their pride as *yukkachu*, for example, that it was not until after the Second World War that significant intermarriage between residents of former *yaadui* villages and other Okinawans took place.

The fact of official encouragement of unemployed *yukkachu* to work as commoners does not mean that Ryukyu's government completely abandoned the idea of an occupational distinction between commoners and *yukkachu*. Messages were mixed. From Sai On's time until the end of the kingdom, official pronouncements continued to reflect the ideal that *yukkachu* should not engage in commoner occupations. The essence of these pronouncements was that, while working at commoner occupations, *yukkachu* were to attire themselves as commoners. This way, they would not publicly advertise the gap between ideal (*jing*) and actual (*quan*) conditions. A law of 1742, for example, prohibited the wives of *yukkachu* from wearing

⁴⁵ For a detailed analysis of *yaadui*, see Tasato Yûtetsu 田里友哲, *Okinawa ni okeru kaitaku shûraku no kenkyû* 沖縄における開拓集落の研究, comprising the whole of *Hôbungaku kiyô* 法文学紀要, shigaku-chirigaku hen 23 (March, 1980).

silver hairpins—the primary external sign of their status—when going to the market to engage in commerce.⁴⁶ Despite such attempts to minimize the visual impact of *yukkachu* working as commoners, it is unlikely that any late eighteenth-century Ryukyuan official seriously thought that provisional measures like the *yaadui* policy would soon become unnecessary.

In several instances, Sai On advocated policies or practices that conflicted with his program of moral rectification, with unusual circumstances as the stated or implied reason. One example concerns liquor. Sai On repeatedly stressed the duty of government officials to curb drunkenness. But he consistently opposed any prohibition of the manufacture of distilled liquor, because this industry provided an economic incentive for peasants to grow more grain. Even though the manufacture of liquor is generally undesirable, Sai On argued, it serves the greater good of keeping food production levels high, providing a hedge against famine. It was in this context that Sai On, as quoted at the start of this essay, likened government administration to reining a galloping horse with a rotten rope.⁴⁷

Sai On pursued specific policies that conformed to his interpretation of *quan*. He also used *quan* in the intellectual arena to attack Buddhism. Buddhism had existed in Ryukyu since at least the fourteenth century, when it came into the islands from Japan. By Sai On's time, virtually all Buddhist temples in Ryukyu were either Shingon or Rinzai Zen. Also, the practice of calling Amida's name (*nenbutsu* 念佛) was a supplementary form of devotion for both varieties of Buddhists, and popular among ordinary Ryukyuans as well. As in Japan, Buddhism in Ryukyu had been closely connected with political power, namely the authority of the king and state. Sai On's largely successful attempt to change the ideological basis of the state from Buddhism (mixed with certain forms of native Ryukyuan religion) to Confucianism, was revolutionary.

In general, those who stood to gain from the "Confucianization" of the state were the residents of Kumemura 久米村, an urban district adjacent to the capital of Shuri 首里. Originally settled by immigrants from coastal China, seventeenth and eighteenth-century

⁴⁶ Dana, "Mibunsei," pp. 52–54.

⁴⁷ *SOZS*, pp. 80–82.

residents of Kumemura specialized in Chinese studies and diplomacy. Owing to the increased importance of Ryukyu's link with China after Satsuma's invasion, Ryukyu's government devoted considerable resources to Kumemura. Policies included encouraging, via financial incentives, the best and the brightest young Ryukyuans to settle in Kumemura as adopted children of established Kumemura families. Sai On's father, for example, was instrumental in the revitalization of Kumemura, which had been in decline since the middle of the sixteenth century. But he was born to a family in Shuri. Sai On's mother came from a family in Tomari 泊, another urban area next to Shuri. Upon reaching adulthood, nearly all male residents of Kumemura received rice stipends that increased with their rank. Although small by Japanese standards, Kumemura residents were the only aristocratic group in Ryukyu to receive a guaranteed salary. In return for such consideration, male residents of Kumemura were expected to specialize in different areas of Chinese studies such as diplomatic correspondence, spoken Chinese (*guanhua*), diplomatic protocol, and so forth. Confucian studies, including the practice of Confucian ritual, formed a major part of the curriculum for all residents of Kumemura.⁴⁸

For reasons that need not concern us here, by the eighteenth century, Kumemura began to exert a strong influence on Ryukyu's internal politics. Connected with this development was the replacement of Japanese Buddhist monks with scholars from Kumemura as royal tutors. Sai On is the best example of a Kumemura scholar rising to great power as a confidant of the monarch. Some general histories of Ryukyu refer to the eighteenth century as "Kumemura's century."

The increasing power of Kumemura, Confucianism, and Chinese ceremonial forms was a threat to the traditional Shuri aristocracy, whose culture derived mainly from Buddhism and Japanese literature. Several prominent Shuri literati led an increasingly desperate campaign against Sai On, failed to appreciate Satsuma's strong support for his leadership, and lost their heads in

⁴⁸ For the best survey of the role of Kumemura in *kinsei* Ryukyu, see Dana Masayuki, "Kinsei Kumemura no seiritsu to tenkai" 近世久米村の成立と展開, *Shin Ryūkyūshi: kinsei hen* (jō), pp. 205–30.

1734.⁴⁹ After this bloody elimination of key opposition leaders, Sai On was able to move ahead quickly with the more ambitious aspects of his political agenda. Important though brute force was in his rise to power, Sai On also worked hard in the academic realm to discredit Buddhism, the religious and intellectual foundation of his opponents. Indeed, he devoted far more space in his philosophical essays to this topic than to any other.

Sai On argued against Buddhism from several perspectives: metaphysical, practical, and historical. His metaphysical critique added nothing new to the arguments of the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi and is therefore of little interest. The historical critique, however, broke new ground and doubled as an affirmation of Sai On's *quan*-like policies. The distinctive assertion in his critique of Buddhism was that Sakyamuni, the historical Buddha, was a great sage, fully on a par with Yao, Shun, Yu, the Duke of Zhou, and the rest of the classic Chinese sages. Arguing against the validity of Buddhism by asserting the sageliness of its founder might seem odd, but as the following discussion of his argument will show, this claim was an essential part of Sai On's approach.

An assumption informing Sai On's historical critique was that in the most remote antiquity, ancient Chinese sages established the fundamental standard(s) (*jing*) for human civilization:

When heaven and earth first opened up, human beings were born. At that time, people differed little from animals. Then, after a while, the Heavenly Emperor 天皇 first established a calendar, fixing the months and years. Emperor Sui 燧皇 was the first to use fire for cooking, Emperor Gu 古皇 first built houses, and Emperor Tai 太皇 first used the five grains for food. Xuan Yuan 軒轅 [the Yellow Emperor] first wore cloth clothing, and [his official] Cang Jie 蒼頡 first created a writing system. Nothing is greater than these sorts of accomplishments. The ancient sages and worthies all aligned themselves with the cosmos (*tian*) and mastered specific principles (*ze* 則), becoming the forbears of the Confucians. . . . Can it possibly be said that there is anyone in the world, past or present, who does not follow the teachings of

⁴⁹ In Ryukyuan history, this event is known as the Heshikiya-Tomoyosé Incident, which ended in the execution of fifteen of Sai On's opponents. The exact details, strategies, and motivations of the actors in this complex affair has been a matter of ongoing debate among scholars of Ryukyuan history. The main point for our purposes is that Sai On ultimately prevailed in a major struggle for power between he and his followers and dissatisfied elements of the traditional Shuri aristocracy.

the sages and who is not within the pale of Confucianism?⁵⁰

It would be the proper goal of any society anywhere, therefore, to implement Confucian teachings in all of their particulars (*ze* 則).

Circumstances, however, did not always permit such implementation. Ancient India at the time of Sakyamuni, for example, was in a state of deep moral decay and rampant evil because it lacked the sagely legacy of China:

Confucius was born during the Warring States Period and Sakyamuni was born in India. At that time, popular customs [in India] were extremely evil, but China was fortunate to have had the legacy of the sages and a few of their [remaining] cultural forms. [Sakyamuni] saw only evil and depravity without restraint among the people [of India]. Although a sage, he had not the strength to save them. Because there was no choice, he stayed at Vulture Peak,⁵¹ where he secretly pondered and calculated. When he left the mountain, he traveled to the west and to the south for several decades, widely teaching the provisional theory of *andhakara* 幽冥,⁵² carrying out *quan* by teaching the *dharma*. These teachings were all instances of skillful means (*fangbian* [upaya] 方便) at a particular time.⁵³

If we accept Sai On's account, Sakyamuni fulfilled Zhu Xi's two conditions for carrying out *quan*. First, conditions in ancient India were so much worse than in the China of Confucius's day that they required deviation from the standards of the ancient Chinese sages. Second, Sakyamuni was a sage. By spreading false teachings about terrible realms of the underworld, he motivated the people of India to behave with at least a modicum of civility.

The idea that ancient India was particularly evil was nothing new in Sai On's day. Confucian scholars often mentioned evil conditions to explain why Sakyamuni, an otherwise excellent person, failed to measure up to his Chinese counterparts like Confucius. This theme was particularly common in Japan, the following passage from Kumazawa Banzan 熊澤蕃山 (1619–91) serving as a typical example: “The country of [Sakyamuni's] birth was terribly benighted, with most of its inhabitants harboring deep desires. It was the extreme of inhumanity (*fujin* 不仁). Because it was a terribly

⁵⁰ SOZS, p. 31.

⁵¹ Grdhrakuta, a mountain in Magadha where the historical Buddha is said to have expounded many of his teachings.

⁵² The Buddhist underworld comprised of such realms as starving ghosts and the various levels of hell.

⁵³ SOZS, p. 160.

hot country, the meat of killed animals could not be set out [for long before rotting], so [meat] was cut while [the animals were] still alive. He who was of deeply humane mind [Sakyamuni] put forth the prohibition against killing to limit such [evil behavior].”⁵⁴ Like the many other Japanese Confucians who spoke highly of Sakyamuni, Kumazawa stopped short of calling him a sage. Because Sakyamuni, while good, was not a sage, neither Kumazawa nor most other Japanese Confucians used the term *quan* to characterize the Buddha's activities.

Sai On's assertion of Sakyamuni's sageliness relies in part on circular reasoning and terminological legerdemain, especially the conflation of *quan* and *upaya* (Ch. *fangbian*). The Buddhist term *upaya*, often translated “skillful means” or “skill in means,” bears a superficial resemblance to *quan*. There are, however, significant differences between the two concepts. Simply stated, *upaya* is a teaching or technique that is ultimately false but heuristically useful for assisting someone to reach a higher level of understanding. Once the person reaches that higher level, he or she realizes the *upaya* as false and discards it, often turning to a more advanced *upaya* for the next step up. An obvious example of *upaya* would be teachings of hells and other unpleasant realms of existence such as starving ghosts. These places or realms may indeed exist metaphorically or psychologically, as one's deluded mental states (e.g., a person driven mad by desires might seem as miserable as a starving ghost), but they are not permanent truths. Their usefulness is in encouraging better behavior and as heuristic metaphors. Sakyamuni's attempt to put his enlightenment experience into words is the first and most important *upaya* for many Mahayana Buddhists. A detailed analysis of *upaya* need not concern us here. The essential point is that Sai On, using both terms interchangeably, typically portrayed Sakyamuni's acts of *upaya* as acts of *quan*.

This conflation may have resulted from Sai On's ignorance of the doctrine of *upaya*, or it may have been a rhetorical sleight of hand. A possible source of Sai On's treating Sakyamuni's *upaya* as *quan* is the then widely read early seventeenth-century Japanese work

⁵⁴ Gotō Yōichi 後藤陽一 and Tomoeda Ryūtarō 友枝龍太郎, eds., *Kumazawa Banzan* 熊澤蕃山, *Nihon shisō taikēi* 30 (Iwanami shoten, 1971), pp. 53–54.

Honsaroku 本佐錄. *Honsaroku* belongs to a syncretic religious and intellectual tradition, *tentō* thought (*tentō shisō* 天道思想), that flourished during Japan's troubled Sengoku period. *Tentō* texts commonly portrayed Sakyamuni as a great man who tried to save India from depravity, but to my knowledge, only *Honsaroku* explicitly equates *upaya* (Jp. *hōben*) and *quan*:

He who was known as Sakyamuni Buddha was unable to govern India because its people's minds were not harmonious. He shut himself up at Mt. Dandaloka and came up with ad hoc notions of heaven and hell as a technique for improving the customs of India and as skill in means (*hōben*) for governing the country. [He taught that] if one does evil, he shall fall into hell. There is not really any heaven or hell. The [teaching] was for the sake of governing *this* world. The mind of the Buddha was of superior quality, and it accorded with the principles (*ri* 理) of governing a country. This is the Way of *quan* (*kendō* 權道).⁵⁵

This passage is unusual not only for regarding Sakyamuni's *upaya* as *quan*, but also because it portrays a this-worldly Sakyamuni, intent on acquiring secular political power to govern India. Sai On's portrayal of the Buddha is similar, and there are other close matches between *Honsaroku* and Sai On's thought. Although Sakyamuni's mind may have accorded with the principles of governing, the passage quoted above goes on to deny him sagehood.

Mahayana Buddhists would acknowledge that Sakyamuni was a master of *upaya*. Even if Sai On himself knew better, it is likely that many of his Ryukyuan readers lacked a sufficiently detailed grasp of Buddhist doctrine and Confucian teachings to find his equation of *upaya* and *quan* problematic. If the Buddha did perform *quan*, then he must have been a sage, Sai On implied. Furthermore, because Sakyamuni was a sage, he ultimately intended to teach Confucianism, not Buddhism:

What is regrettable is that [Sakyamuni] died in the midst of his task before he could spread [teachings] of the true pattern of the Heavenly Way and the true function of the Human Way. In the end, there was nobody to continue the true enterprise and disseminate teachings of the true function. As a result, the people of India knew there was a teaching of the Buddhist Law that was skillful means, but they were ignorant of Sakyamuni's true intention, which he had not yet stated. Extending in all directions and throughout the world, common people all regard the underworld as

⁵⁵ Ishida Ichirō 石田一良 and Kanaya Osamu 金谷治, eds., *Fujiwara Seika, Hayashi Razan* 藤原惶窩, 林羅山, *Nihon shisō taikē* 28 (Iwanami shoten, 1982), p. 293.

really existing, never awakening in the end. Ah! The basis for popular customs is so outlandish!⁵⁶

Popular Buddhism, in other words, was all a big misunderstanding owing to the inability of the Buddha's followers to know his overall plan. How Sai On was privy to Sakyamuni's innermost intentions when none of his immediate followers could figure them out, he does not say.

The argument thus far only explains popular forms of Buddhism. It could not account for meditative forms of Buddhism such as Zen. Despite the claim above that none of the Buddha's followers knew his true intentions, Sai On elsewhere stated that Sakyamuni had a small number of outstanding disciples to whom he taught the real truth. In terms of its fundamental substance, this Buddhist truth is identical with the most profound insights of Confucianism. Even in this case, however, Confucianism is superior to Buddhism because the former provides a more practical method for arriving at these insights.

The obvious conclusion from Sai On's portrayal of Sakyamuni as a master of *quan* is that, because *quan* is valid only for a specific time, place, and set of circumstances, Buddhism as a formal religion and set of institutional practices would not be applicable to eighteenth-century Ryukyu. Sai On's historical critique of Buddhism called into question the legitimacy of a Buddhist establishment outside ancient India, while reinforcing his universalistic claims for Confucianism.

The critique also served another purpose. By extolling Sakyamuni's sagehood and defining that sagehood mainly as a function of enacting *quan* to regulate Indian society, Sai On also affirmed his own unconventional policies. Just as Sakyamuni was right to speak of the underworld in his own time, place, and circumstances, so too was Sai On right to encourage unemployed *yukkachu* to work at commoner occupations owing to the circumstances of eighteenth-century Ryukyu. Indeed, with some irony we might call this vigorous opponent of Buddhism "The Sakyamuni of Ryukyu." Sai On appropriated the concept of *quan* and the legacy of Sakyamuni to promote his own political agenda.

⁵⁶ SOZS, p. 160.

CONCLUSIONS

Sai On's appropriation and employment of *quan*—which in his usage is perhaps best translated “sagely expediency”—was the primary means by which he bridged the gap between theory and practice, thereby unifying what Confucians regarded as two poles of a continuum. Sai On was clearly committed to making Ryukyu into an ideal Confucian society, but the demands and dilemmas of office for over thirty years tempered his idealism. There can be little doubt that Cheng Yi, Zhu Xi, Yamazaki Ansai, and many other Confucian scholars would have disapproved of Sai On's pragmatic, politicized uses of *quan*, not to mention his confidence in being an appropriate agent of such uses. Nevertheless, *quan* enabled Sai On both to pursue conventional Confucian goals in revising rituals and transforming popular behavior in the name of morality, and to have the flexibility to deviate from such policies when facing pressing problems. Sai On's approach worked. His projects and policies were successful in raising the material and cultural standard of Ryukyuan society, producing what many historians of Ryukyu call the kingdom's “second golden age.”

Sai On took considerable liberties with terminology, reasoning, and interpretation. He loosened the requirements of sagehood to include Sakyamuni, himself, and, at least potentially, many other Ryukyuan as well. Like Nakae Tōju, Sai On tended to reverse the conventional roles of *quan* and *jing*, taking the widely accepted notion that change lies at the heart of the cosmos to require and authorize frequent use of *quan*. In this view, *jing*, taken as the rough equivalent of *li* (social norms, ritual forms, rules of behavior, etc.), serves as a temporary expedient for those not yet sufficiently advanced in moral cultivation to employ *quan*. *Jing*, in other words, would be like the training wheels on a bicycle. Problematic though we may find his argument today, Sai On was the only Confucian to my knowledge ever to make *quan* a key element in a systematic critique of Buddhism. Closely linked with *quan* in this context was the strong assertion of Sakyamuni's sageliness, another uncommon assertion by a Confucian, despite the tendency in Ming and Qing times for Confucians to acknowledge at least some goodness in the historical Buddha.

Considering these and other distinctive features of Sai On's Confucianism, is it reasonable to regard him as a Confucian? In his writings he certainly presented himself as a Confucian in the best tradition of illustrious predecessors. These writings, however, also contain defensive justifications of his modifying Confucian norms, sometimes citing *Mencius* (2B:13)—“This is one time; that is another time”—in his defense.⁵⁷ At a minimum, Sai On was aware that others might regard his Confucianism as unconventional.

Wm. Theodore de Bary is well known for adumbrating a model of East Asian Neo-Confucianism that takes “unfolding” as its guiding metaphor. To summarize de Bary's complex argument, Zhu Xi's synthesis was so extensive, profound, and pregnant with possibilities that it defined the broad parameters of a dynamic Neo-Confucian tradition that changed with the times throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties and in other East Asian societies. “The Neo-Confucian synthesis was not a static one,” he wrote, “but contained within itself the vitality to generate new forms, the strength to engage in self-criticism, and the resilience to contain stresses and strains.” Indeed, even critics of certain parts of the Cheng-Zhu formulation usually ended up affirming some other value of the system, de Bary argues.⁵⁸ This Neo-Confucian synthesis was not wanting in possibilities for the development of scientific or pragmatic thought: “Changing historical conditions serve to actualize and fructify different potentialities of this living synthesis at different times. . . . I attempt to show how from the same Neo-Confucian synthesis emerged a strong trend in the seventeenth century toward a kind of Confucian positivism or pragmatism, which has been variously characterized as ‘practical learning,’ ‘empiricism,’ and ‘scientific thought.’ ”⁵⁹ Unfolding of its own inner logic,

⁵⁷ For example: “A *yukkachu* asked the old man [= Sai On], ‘Confucius never spoke of strange phenomena, so why do you talk about strange things?’

The old man said, ‘This is one time; that was another time. . . . The whole country rejects what is substantive and careens toward what is ephemeral, like a downpour of water rushing down hill. Benevolence, duty, and beautiful customs have been destroyed on account of non-substantive deception. This is the major way in which today's world differs from that of ancient times’ ” (*SOZS*, p. 74).

⁵⁸ Wm. Theodore de Bary, “Introduction,” Wm. Theodore de Bary et al, *The Unfolding of Neo-Confucianism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 18.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

the Neo-Confucian tradition even served China and other East Asian societies well as the basis of their modernization.

In the 1970s, de Bary's "unfolding" model was a bold revision of the tendency to characterize the Confucian tradition as static, moribund, and a hindrance to modern development. In the 1980s and early 90s, the "unfolding" model came under criticism from a number of perspectives. Benjamin A. Elman, for example, wrote of "the unraveling of Neo-Confucianism" owing to emergence of *kaozheng* 考證 scholarship in eighteenth-century China. He argued that the renewed interest in the philological analysis of ancient texts had the effect of "calling into question the dominant Confucian ideology, that is, the Chu Hsi school."⁶⁰ Once started, this critical movement did not stop with Song texts. By being true to its "increasingly rigorous and critical approach to the Classics," *kaozheng* scholarship eventually "jeopardized the classical claim to unquestioned authority,"⁶¹ thereby dismantling the whole Confucian edifice. One "indication of the dismantling of Neo-Confucianism was the sudden decline in emphasis on moral cultivation after 1644. Instead, Ming loyalists and their followers stressed practical stagecraft as the key element of the Confucian legacy."⁶²

Elman's "unraveling" model, I would argue, is not the inevitable conclusion one must draw from the empirical data on *kaozheng* scholarship. But it is a reasonable interpretation of that data. In other words, *kaozheng* scholarship, at least in Elman's view, came to differ in so many basic ways from the Cheng-Zhu formulation that it became an antagonistic force to that formulation. One could take the same data, however, and see it as a "new form," of Neo-Confucianism that "unfolded" from "the strength to engage in self-criticism," to use de Bary's terminology. The issue is a matter of judgment and perspective.

Though not formally a *kaozheng* scholar, Sai On certainly saw practical statecraft as the key element of the Confucian legacy (even in the sense that Elman uses the term, that is, specialized technical

⁶⁰ Benjamin A. Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1984), p. 27.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 53.

expertise, which Sai On held in high regard). Do Sai On's uses and interpretations of *quan*, and the other peculiarities of his Confucianism, represent an "unfolding" of Neo-Confucianism or an "unraveling"? One could make a case for either choice. On the one hand, the metaphysical basis of Sai On's thought closely followed the Cheng-Zhu formulation, and he affirmed many of its key moral values. On the other hand, Sai On's pragmatic, Machiavellian-tending Confucianism, based on his appropriation of *quan*, would have been anathema to either Cheng Yi or Zhu Xi.

Sai On both unfolded and unraveled. His thought contains few totally original elements, but he was a creative editor. He adapted parts of several traditions—including Cheng-Zhu Confucianism, Wang Yangming, the eclectic world of seventeenth-century Japanese Confucianism, Japanese *tentō* texts, and the geomancy of Fujian—to provide intellectual support and technical knowledge for his political program.⁶³ The Confucian tradition, broadly defined, served as the conceptual framework for Sai On's synthesis, and *quan* was the key integrating concept.

⁶³ For a more detailed explanation of Sai On as an eclectic "editor," combining elements from a variety of Chinese and Japanese traditions, see Smits, "Sai On no gakutō to shisō."