

Religion as practice, politics as mission

In 1888, leading Japanese government figures met to formulate what would become the first modern constitution of a non-Western country. One of the major issues they discussed was what role religion should play in the new state. In this article, Kiri Paramore examines both the role of Western state models, and Confucian political ideas in informing constructions of political modernity in 19th century Japan.

Kiri Paramore



Left:
Prime Minister
Itō Hirobumi
(1841-1909)

ITŌ HIROBUMI (1841-1909), the Prime Minister, opened the constitutional convention which drafted this first imperial constitution with the following words:

*"If we wish to establish a constitution now, first we must look for a central axis for our nation, and establish what we should say that central axis is... In Europe... the existence of religion, and the employment of religion as a central axis, deeply embedded in the minds of the people, has ultimately unified the minds of the people. In our country, however, religion does not possess this kind of power... In our country the only thing that can be used as a central axis is the imperial house. Therefore, in the drafting of the constitution, we must focus our minds on using this point, raising up imperial rule, and striving that it not be restrained."*¹

This quote concisely sums up the motivation for the creation of what would later be labelled State Shinto – the integration of the emperor cult into the modern Japanese political system. It explains the primary role given to religion in the late 19th century construction of the political and ideological structures of modern Japan as an attempt to replicate a Western model. The 'Western model' that the constitution aimed to emulate, however, could not have been further from the theoretically imagined model of the 'secular West'. Hirobumi's vision of the central political role of religion in the systems of Western empire is rather closer to that of recent academic analysis by the likes of Peter van der Veer.

'Modern Japan' and the 'Western model'

The Japanese case, however, represents more than just an example of 'Western impact'. Indigenous Japanese society and its political culture were not simply objects of Westernisation and modernisation. Conversely, they were primarily – through most of the 20th century certainly – agents of modernisation and Westernisation, embracing and advocating Western political systems and technology and imposing it on others (China and Korea notably) in the same manner as (other) Western empires. There had developed in Japan, well before the onset of Japanese modernisation, a complex awareness of Western social, political and scientific technology as both an object to absorb, but also to define national identity against.² The views of the likes of Hirobumi, and the way those views emerged in earlier political society, are therefore also of value in allowing us to understand the interactions and parallels between indigenous and westernising political traditions that foreshadowed late 19th century processes of modernisation in general.

Most scholarly attention to the discussion of the role of religion in Japanese political society pre-1868, however, has tended to focus on the individual case of Japan, dealing with the sources predominantly in terms of national history narratives.³ There has been comparatively little attention to where this fits into global historical developments in both the political theory and historical reality of the relationship between church and state, or religion and state, in the development of global paradigms on governance and society. A notable exception is the sometime scholar and populist writer Ian Buruma, who has integrated this aspect of Japanese history into explanations of global historical trends.⁴ Buruma refers to State Shinto as being based on 'a misunderstanding of the role of religion in the

West'. His argument is a wonderfully clear articulation of the dominant paradigms of liberal ideology today. Following the determined historical teleology of that ideology, Buruma assumes that religion and state were successfully separated in the West during the so-called 'enlightenment'. His rather uncritical (or perhaps politically conscious) embrace of the ideological standpoint of 'the enlightenment' determines his position that Hirobumi's analysis could only ever be a 'misunderstanding'.

It would be very easy to oppose Buruma's position by stating simply that Hirobumi's analysis was not a misunderstanding at all but rather, a good grasp of the reality of modern Western imperial states: an insight to be learnt from. After all, if we look at the nexus between Western empire and religion at this time, be it the use of Catholicism in Vietnam, or the complex relations between religious, national, imperial and colonial identities in India and Britain, or the phenomena of the Christian missions in China – all phenomena that Japanese leaders and thinkers were very familiar with throughout the 19th century – it is clear that interaction between religion and expansionist state activities existed.

To simply say that the Japanese conception of the role of religion in modern nations was a sharp insight, however, in some ways brings us to the same end-point as stating that it was a complete misunderstanding. Both positions are based on looking at the situations in Japan and Europe pre-1850s as if they were totally unrelated and foreign phenomena. A more interesting venture is to tease out commonalities between both Western and Japanese uses of religion in early-modern statecraft. In particular, to look at how these two interpreted each other when their political-judicial systems were (to an extent) standardised in the process of so-called 'Westernisation' or 'modernisation' in Japan in the late 1800s. Looking at this historical background allows us to go beyond narratives of 'reaction to the West' and rather, look at the development of political ideas in Japan in parallel with the plurality of experiences of other societies during this period.

18th-19th century Japanese Confucian political philosophy

By 1888, the greatest influence on the creation of frameworks of statecraft and governance by members of the Japanese elite like Hirobumi was undoubtedly the West. But leaders like Hirobumi were also influenced by a political tradition which had developed a role for what we could call religion in statecraft through a primarily (although not exclusively) non-Western tradition of Confucian political philosophy. This political philosophy emerged partly in reaction to circumstances in Japanese society (both economic and political) during the period of Tokugawa Shogunate rule (1603-1868). Although not primarily influenced by the circumstances or political paradigms of early-modern Europe, it perhaps demonstrated many parallels with them – a point I will come back to.

One particularly powerful work of Confucian political philosophy which deeply influenced Hirobumi and most other samurai who played central roles in the Meiji revolution was the 1825 work *New Thesis (Shinron)* written by the Mito domain samurai intellectual and Confucian Aizawa Seishisai (1782-1863). *New Thesis*, in a tradition of Confucian political

writing seen throughout the previous 200 years, called for reform and improvement of shogunal systems of government to bring them into line with the writer's vision of a Confucian ideal of governance. Seishisai's political philosophy standpoint was influenced primarily by the earlier Tokugawa Confucian thinker Ogyū Sorai (1666-1728) and nativist reactions to Sorai from the late 18th century. But Seishisai's views were explicated primarily in terms of a reaction to the threat of Western imperialism, sometimes even referring to the efficacy of elements of Western political practice in contrast to (from Seishisai's perspective) problematic elements of contemporary Chinese and Japanese governance.

In *Shinron* and supporting writing from the same 1820s period, Seishisai identified links between governance and religious practice as the key to maintaining the integrity of the Japanese state. Seishisai, following a number of earlier Tokugawa scholars, regarded the success of Western imperial expansion as being primarily due not to technology, capitalism or gunpowder, but to the incredible levels of political and social integration provided by the socio-religious systems of Western states.⁵ The key to those systems, and the chief difference with the declining Chinese and Japanese, was the West's use of Christianity. Seishisai saw in Christianity Western states' central deployment of the 'prerogative' or 'method' of what the Confucian political philosophical tradition he was writing from called 'rites and music' (Jp. *reigaku*, Ch. *liyue*).⁶ Twentieth century scholars have described this Tokugawa conception of the political utilisation of rites and music as 'religion', the deployment of religious practice in statecraft.⁷

The major intellectual influence on Aizawa Seishisai's conception of the central importance of rites and music, and indeed the major figure in the history of Tokugawa Confucianism, was Ogyū Sorai. One of Sorai's major philosophical positions was to equate the Confucian 'Way' (the means of achieving social harmony in line with nature) with the rites and music of the Ancient Sage Kings of a semi-mystical Chinese antiquity. For Sorai, unlike most other Confucians in East Asia at this time, Confucian truth was to be found not in moral prescriptions of earlier philosophers like Mencius and Zhu Xi (the Neo-Confucianism familiar to readers of Hegel and Weber) but in the historical truth of the rule of the 'Ancient Sage Kings' of Chinese antiquity – pre 700AD. This period, the Zhou dynasty and before, Sorai Confucianism's golden age, was a time when historically, as Sorai correctly points out, political structures in Chinese society were feudal – as they were in Sorai's Tokugawa Japan. Sorai's Confucian heroes were thereby feudal sovereigns and lords – practitioners of politics rather than their commentators.

According to Sorai, the Confucian Classics themselves were written for no other purpose than to instruct the ruling class (which for Sorai meant the samurai) in how to rule over society. For Sorai, the way to hold sway over society was not through Neo-Confucian self-cultivation – which Sorai labelled as 'selfish' and 'Buddhist' – but through the rites and music established by the Ancient Sage Kings in Chinese antiquity and revealed in the ancient texts. Sorai's rites and music concept, although proposed as the underpinnings of a political system, emphasised a practice that was clearly religious, even transcending the temporal world.

*Pervading heaven and earth, the substance of the rites reaches minute, subtle areas, giving everything its standard, and providing systematic order to irregularities. There is no aspect of the rites that the way does not penetrate. Princes study them, while the common people follow them... By following the rites, people are transformed. Once transformed, they follow the rules of the Lord on high (Jp. *tei*, Ch. *di*) unconsciously and unknowingly. How could there possibly be anything that is not good if the rites are thoroughly followed?*⁸

What had previously been referred to in Neo-Confucianism as absolute moral values such as benevolence and righteousness were instead interpreted by Sorai as manifestations of social relations demonstrated through the practice of rites and music.⁹

Sorai's original take on Confucianism became popular in his own lifetime and continued to hold sway as one of the dominant trends in Confucian political thought in Japan even into the modern period. Figures like Nishi Amane (1829-1897), for instance, a contemporary of Ito Hirobumi, one of the earliest Japanese experts on Western philosophy, and (after studies in Leiden) the initiator of many of the modern legal institutions of Meiji Japan, continued to show the influence of Sorai throughout his life.

Sorai's work was also possibly just as important as the provocateur of the growth of Japanese nativism or *Kokugaku*, one of the major intellectual currents linked to the growth of emperor-centric nationalism and the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Key early figures in *Kokugaku*, like Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801), deliberately replaced Sorai's idealised ancient China with a set

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Pre-modern antecedents to the role of religion in modern imperialism



Above: Yu the Great, one of the legendary Three Sage Kings. As imagined by Song Dynasty painter Ma Lin (馬麟). Painting is located in the National Palace Museum, Taipei. Tokugawa Confucian thinker Ogyū Sorai (1666-1728) believed that Confucian truth was to be found in the historical truth of the rule of the 'Ancient Sage Kings' of Chinese antiquity—pre 700AD.

Below: Illustration of 'The Ceremony Promulgating the Constitution', Artist Unknown. 1890. Photograph courtesy of MIT Vizualizing Cultures.



of imagined traditions and customs of an 'ancient' Japanese past. Based on a sanctification of Japanese classical literature and invented custom, many of Norinaga's ideas were clearly searching for an indigenous rites and music. The *Kokugaku* of Norinaga, although originally conceived in direct opposition to Sorai's ideas, came to be, in part, integrated into some forms of Japanese Confucian political philosophy—notably that of Aizawa Seishisai.¹⁰

Japanese Confucianism's lens on Christianity as statecraft
Seishisai partly engaged and partly courted the popularity of *Kokugaku* ideas, not only through his clear Japanese nationalism but also through his disparagement of China and his positioning of the Japanese imperial line as objects of religious worship. To some extent, he conflated Sorai Confucianism with *Kokugaku* by advocating a system that, at its heart, basically inserted Japanese emperors in the place of the roles Sorai saw the Chinese Ancient Sage Kings playing in history.¹¹

Seishisai's view of the West's deployment of Christianity for social control was thereby coloured totally by Sorai's conceptions of rites and music—as delivered both through Sorai's own philosophy, and the bastardised nativist versions of it presented later by the *Kokugaku* movement. Seishisai analysed the Western imperialist deployment of religion through the Sorai constructed idea of rites and music. Of course, as Seishisai himself explained, what he saw the Westerners using were not the 'real' 'natural' rites and music of the ancient Sage Kings, but another kind of rites and music which functioned similarly. Both the Way of the Sages and the Way of the Barbarian Gods, China/Japan and the West, were described as worshipping Heaven or the Lord of Heaven and employing rites and music. The difference being that while in the Central Kingdom (China/Japan) Heaven was originally (by the sages) worshipped correctly through fathers and sovereigns, in the West the rites were used to worship a 'barbarian god' (Christ) who was set up to displace the natural social relations which underlay order. The Way of the Sages was contrasted against The Way of Barbarian Gods.

The nature of Japanese political modernity then (what some would call its 'success'), was influenced not so much by the extent or lack of its conformity to Western models, as by the extent of parallel between political outlooks—something determined equally by the earlier parallel development of both societies and also informed and affected by their bordering regions.

Normal human sentiment is to stand in awe of Heaven's authority. So the Sages revered Heaven. Serving Heaven was like serving their parents. Through their ancestors, they offered to Heaven. Serving their ancestors was also like serving Heaven. There were the appropriate rites and the appropriate music... In this way the masses came to have a mind to stand in awe of Heaven's authority, and thereby revere the sovereign. Heaven and sovereign were one. The masses were nurtured. This is the sages' great prerogative and method of governing the world and ruling the masses. The barbarians and their lackeys set up a foreign god, and using this they corrupt the stupid masses. Thereby they use the masses natural inclination to respect Heaven [their natural religious inclination] to get them to respect their rulers and betters.¹²

This later development of Confucian political philosophy on the role of religious practice as part of nation-state construction and national expansion, although on the one hand having clearly originated in Confucian political philosophy paradigms, can hereby be seen to have also interacted directly with observation of the employment of religion in Western imperial expansion. This was the writing that formed an important ideological underpinning of the Meiji revolution and the reform of government—especially in regard to the role of religion—which followed.

The key developmental background to this writing, however, was clearly the move in the 18th century away from a Neo-Confucian emphasis on morals to the Sorai inspired emphasis on rites and music. A move from justification of order on shared static moral norms, to one based on shared religiously inclined social practice. This movement clearly shares parallels with changes that occurred in a similar period in Western Europe—both in religious thought through the influence of Puritanism and Calvinism, and through related changes to political philosophy that emphasised social mores and behaviour over morals.

Some scholars have related these parallels in Japanese and Protestant religious thought to the concurrent rise of commercial society in both places. Japan from the 1600s, under Tokugawa rule, attained a level of market integration and commercialisation throughout the country which began to dwarf that seen in earlier pre-modern global history. This can be seen, for instance, in terms of the growth of urban centres, volumes of trade and development of financial institutions, growth trends that were only matched in Europe from the 18th century onwards.

The pre-modern basis of the 'modern encounter'
Itō Hirobumi in 1888 saw Christianity as an underlying part of the Western political construct of empire just as Aizawa Seishisai had 60 years earlier. But their understanding of the role of religion in modern Western empire was informed not only by observation. Simply looking at something does not enable understanding. There must be references, analogies and parallels from which to construct an understanding based on observation.

The parallel development of the role of religion in Confucian models of politics in Japan gave Confucian political thinkers like Seishisai and modernising politicians like Hirobumi that reference. The nature of Japanese political modernity then (what some would call its 'success'), was influenced not so much by the extent or lack of its conformity to Western models, as by the extent of parallel between political outlooks—something determined equally by the earlier parallel development of both societies and also informed and affected by their bordering regions. The history of the 'modern encounter' then, I would argue, needs to be understood not only in terms of the encounter itself but also through the history of earlier development which created the parallels for comparison.

The fact that the sort of changes in Confucian thought described in this paper did not occur in China at the same time is an important case in point. It is one reason that both the process of imperial encounter, and the development of the place of religion in modern Chinese society thereafter, played out so differently to Japan. To construct a transnational history, including that of the globalised world of empire, it is, I would argue, important to understand cross-regional parallels through which we can historicise agencies in the 'encounter' other than only the agencies of empire and modernity. To historicise a true encounter, it is necessary to provide a model for telling the histories of both sides of the interaction. This requires a parallel outlook, and therefore a focus on history before modernity. Serious study of immediately pre-modern (early-modern) history is the only way to truly understand the imperial encounters and thereby the history of modernity.

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