Ito Jinsai’s Search for the Meaning of the Chinese Classics; a Revolution in Japanese Confucianism

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Abstract: The Japanese Confucian Scholar Ito Jinsai (1627-1705) took Confucian studies in Japan in a radically new direction. He challenged the basis of the Confucian orthodoxy that existed by asserting that language itself, rather than metaphysics, was the proper topic of inquiry for the Confucian scholar. His sophisticated study of the Analects and Mencius entitled Gomoji stands out among his works as a representative of his thought. Gomoji is treated in detail within this paper with regards to Jinsai’s conception of the Confucian project. Jinsai challenged the Chinese Neo-Confucian orthodoxy. Whereas intellectuals had previously tried to mimic the Chinese tradition from without, Jinsai tried to reinvent it from within. Rather than attempting to come closer to understanding Song dynasty interpretations of the classics by Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi, Jinsai came to the conclusion that the whole


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When Ito Jinsai (1627-1705) established his school of Confucian studies in the second half of the seventeenth century, the sophisticated study of the Confucian canon in Tokugawa Japan had a history of about two hundred years. Jinsai and his school, later known as the Hall of Ancient Meanings (Kogidō), revolutionized the whole field of Confucian studies in Japan by challenging the very basis of the Chinese Neo-Confucian orthodoxy. Whereas intellectuals had previously tried to mimic the Chinese tradition from without, Jinsai tried to reinvent it from within. Rather than attempting to come closer to understanding Song dynasty interpretations of the classics by Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi, Jinsai came to the conclusion that the whole Chinese interpretive tradition had lost its foundations in the teachings of Mencius and Confucius, and that the Japanese reader could obtain insights that the contemporary Chinese reader did not have.

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1. Jinsai does not completely condemn the Song tradition; he speaks favorably of Cheng Yi and others when he considers their interpretations correct. He also sees Han Yu and Ouyang Xiu as rational philologists with important insights into the classic tradition. In addition, he does not overturn the assumption that the Six Classics must be read with the Analects and Mencius as an interpretive medium. Although Jinsai read widely in the works of alternative interpretative traditions such of that of Xunzi, he did not question the centrality of Mencius and Confucius as interpreters of the former kings. He did, however, discount the significance of the Great Learning (Da Xue), asserting that it was not a product of the Kong family of Confucius, in part because he found some of the metaphysical assumptions contained within it to be inconsistent with the Confucian tradition as he
The import of Jinsai’s assault on the essential mistakes of the Song Neo-Confucian interpretation and, by extension, the errors of the supporters of such interpretations in Japan, is clearest in work of 1683 Meanings of Words in the Analects and the Mencius (Gomôjigi). He attempts to clarify in concrete metaphors and unadorned language the essential meaning of basic philosophical terms in the two fundamental classics of the Confucian tradition. As perhaps the first Japanese scholar to achieve full competency in archaic Chinese, Jinsai not only read a greater variety of Chinese works than his predecessors, he also wrote in a highly polished classical Chinese. Jinsai felt at ease establishing his own original arguments regarding the classics on philological issues. Previous scholars were not at home within the Chinese language and thus devoted their attention to the accurate interpretation of secondary commentary on the classics, in part because they saw themselves as on the outside looking in. Jinsai, by asserting that he had obtained understanding of the classics lost by the Chinese themselves, placed himself, in a rhetorical sense, on the inside looking out.

The major points of Jinsai’s philosophy are inextricable from his study of language. This paper explores the arguments Jinsai made about the meanings of terms in the Analects and the Mencius with particular attention to his concern for the contextual and organic nature of signification.

In order to understand something of the radical nature of Jinsai’s approach to on linguistic issues in the classics, we should consider imagined it. Jinsai opened the door, nonetheless, to a more far reaching reevaluation of the Chinese tradition. Ogyû Sorai would assert in the early eighteenth century that Mencius himself had an imperfect understanding of the ancient teachings. The door was open for Nativist (Kokugaku) thinkers like Motoori Norinaga to use the tools of Sinological textural investigation in an effort to deny the entirety of the Chinese tradition.

the interpretive tradition in Japan, as it existed in Jinsai’s time. The Japanese were familiar with Chinese philosophy from the Yamato period on, and sophisticated considerations of the Chinese classical tradition emerge in the Heian period. There was not an extensive network of readers in the classical tradition outside of the government bureaucracy until the Kamakura period when educated Buddhist monks, many with direct interactions with Chinese scholars, developed a intellectual movement in the Five Mountain (Gozan) temples of Kamakura. Such efforts were for the most part literary and artistic, with the bulk of interest focused on the Chinese tradition, as it existed in the present day, not in antiquity. Although Buddhist monks in name, many individuals.

Only when Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s ill-fated invasion of the Korean peninsula (1592-1597) gave Japanese intellectuals exposure to the full complexity and authority of the later Confucian tradition did Song Neo-Confucianism gain a substantial foothold in Japan. The Japanese philosopher Fujiwara Seika, a Buddhist monk from the famous Reizei family of Japanese court poetry, started his education as a struggle to separate the field of Chinese Confucianism learning from the Buddhist teachings that surrounded them in the monasteries where they had previously been taught. Confucianism had become a secondary discipline within the larger scholarly tradition of the medieval temples. Seika did not acquire the sophisticated command of classical Chinese that Jinsai would, and was later lambasted for his grammatical mistakes. Seika rather devoted his entire energy to an attempt to master the doctrines expounded with absolute authority in the texts he read. He saw language as a means of reaching the truths beyond. Seika’s dream of an independent Confucian school under the patronage of the Shogunate was realized by his star pupil Hayashi Razan (1583-1657).

Hayashi Razan succeeded in getting the attention of the new Shogunate founded by Tokugawa Ieyasu after he had unified the recently unified Japanese archipelago. Ieyasu found Razan’s ideas about the proper role of the sovereign very pertinent to his own con-
cerns as he dealt increasing with the intractable issues of governing an administration more complex and diverse than any in Japan’s history. He readily took Razan on as an advisor on scholarly and political matters. Razan’s family was enfeoffed at the head of the Shogunal school in Edo at Shinobazu Lake. Although Razan was not an original thinker in the Confucian tradition, and did not have complete mastery of classical Chinese, his school produced a new generation of careful readers of Chinese with exposure to the works of Cheng Yi, Cheng Hao, and Zhu Xi. His efforts to create a large reading community established an interpretive community receptive to the efforts of Jinsai.

Some important modifications had to be made to the Confucian tradition before it could be considered a state orthodoxy under Ieyasu. First, “scholar official” (shi), and “gentleman” (kunshi) of the Confucian tradition had to be reinterpreted as applying to the Samurai military officer, the privileged warrior class within the Shogunate. Although the Chinese characters employed for “scholar official” and “samurai” are the same, this translation involved an intentional misreading of the Chinese tradition and an inversion of the Chinese hierarchy of civilian over military. Jinsai, who, as a civilian with no ties to the samurai class, saw it as a total distortion of the canon, would question such a reversal of the status of the military. Jinsai would take issue with this interpretation, asserting in his Dojimon (questions in response to students) that “when the civilian (literary) dominates over the military, the country’s mandate is enduring; when the military dominates over the civilian, the vitality of the nation is stymied.”

The intentional adaptation of the Chinese tradition to Japanese political reality was essential to the success of Confucianism in the pre-modern period. It was the artificiality of the interpretation that inspired Jinsai’s revision.

3. "..." by ..., in Kinsei shisōka bunshû (Nihon koten bun-gaku taikei, volume 97) Iwanami Publishers, Tokyo 1966. All subsequent references to Kinsei shisōka are to this volume.
The same social context made the concept of chû (loyalty) central in Japanese Neo-Confucianism, and limited its nuances. In a feudal establishment consisting of semi-independent vassals tied to the Shogun by loyalty, Chu was seen as an essential quality of human interaction. This conception of loyalty involved a distortion of the original Confucian term zhong, which is closer to “earnestness” in the original connotation. Jinsai attacked the simplistic definition of loyalty in terms of sacrifice for one’s lord promoted by the samurai. He considered the highest responsibility of the minister to his ruler to consist in earnest advice, not the meaningless self-immolation popular among samurai. Jinsai stresses repeatedly in the Gomôjigi the value of giving proper, even critical, advice to the ruler. Never does he speak of the absolute self-sacrifice seen in other Neo-Confucian Japanese writings of the seventeenth century. In Jinsai’s moral world the concept of jin, humanness or benevolence, displaces the uncritical hierarchical organization of the body politic in Japanese Confucianism embodied in chû. Jinsai was the product of a Japan in which peace had been sustained for over eighty years, a Japan in which an alternative to the Samurai code was required. He saw in the accurate perception of the Confucian tradition an opportunity for such revision. So much did he value the concept of Jin that he even integrated it into his own sobriquet Jinsai, or “studio of humanness.”

Jinsai’s insistence on close textural study resulted from an awareness of profound conceptual contamination in the tradition he had inherited. Jinsai’s Gomôjigi can be seen as an indirect criticism of the most important proponent of Song Neo-Confucianism in Jinsai’s home town of Kyoto, Yamazaki Ansai (1618-1682). Ansai died only the year before Jinsai finished Gomôjigi and was no doubt much on his mind. Ansai approached the classics through constant

4. Dôjimon, maki no chû, 39.
5. Gomôjigi was written in 1683, eighty-two years after Tokugawa Ieyasu’s unification of Japan.
reference to metaphysically inspired glosses. In his teaching method, Ansai viewed the words of the classics as manifestations of the abstract truths described in Song Neo-Confucian theories. He did not put a high value on a philological command of classical Chinese. The words of the classics were seen, as a means of understanding abstractions beyond them and the weight in Ansai’s approach to teaching did not fall on the command of Chinese syntax.

Ansai blended together Confucianism with a variety of Shinto concepts in his teachings to create a new metaphysical Shinto ideology known as Suika Shinto. Ansai ingeniously shaped the philosophical concepts of Neo-Confucianism into a philosophical foundation for a Shinto ideology. Whatever the hermeneutic genius of Ansai may have been, there was absolutely no historical basis for Ansai’s constructions. Jinsai, by contrast, approached the Analects and the Mencius by stressing the formulation of a consistent interpretation of their significance based on internal evidence. Although later glosses clearly influence his readings, Jinsai does not use them to defend his interpretations. He saw Ansai’s approach as an obstacle to the original truths. Jinsai stated his own position very clearly: “My school has no school tradition of interpretation. We merely understand the text of the Analects and the Mencius by confronting the accurate original texts. That is the tradition of my school.” Jinsai was revolting against a strong tendency to view knowledge as the property of a school’s privileged members that was to be jealously guarded. Jinsai wanted his students to develop as competent readers completely independent of his tutelage. For Jinsai glosses on the classics impeded understanding.

Jinsai criticized such Confucians as Hayashi Razan for their failure to master classical Chinese and its distinctions from vernacular usage. Jinsai achieved an internal sense of the rhythm of Chinese rare in Japan and thus was able to formulate his arguments within the rhetorical confines of Confucian discourse. His amazing linguistic
skill gave him the confidence to condemn the later Chinese tradition as misguided. Most Confucian scholars before Jinsai relied on the *kundoku* system of reading Chinese in which a series of numbers and markers allows the Japanese reader to break up phrases of classical Chinese and read them according to Japanese syntax and pronunciation. Although a useful tool for teaching, Jinsai rightly viewed *kundoku* practice as destructive to the internal logic of ancient Chinese. More often than not, false associations with Japanese readings contaminated Chinese concepts. In addition, ancient Chinese appeared more remote than necessary because Japanese readers were dependent on a second grammatical reconstitution. Jinsai read Chinese with a native proficiency in all registers from the Book of Songs to popular fictional works like Feng Menglong’s *jingshi hengyen*. He thus felt confident explaining how the interpretation of ancient terms like *li* and *ming* had been misapplied in later ages to the classics. The use of later concepts to interpret anachronistically the classics was the source of all the present misunderstanding of Confucianism. So great was Jinsai’s command of classical Chinese that he had the confidence to criticize the style of Chinese writers: he said of the Yuan scholar Fang Hui that his writing is “loquacious and not concinnous.”

The stress on linguistic issues in Jinsai’s scholarship bears no small resemblance to the general philological propensity in the post-Ming intellectual community of China, especially as espoused by members of the Kaozheng (Evidential Studies) movement. Although we cannot be sure of exactly which books Jinsai read and did not read, none of his contemporaries, such as Yen Ruoqu or Gu Yenwu are quoted in his works. In fact Wang Yangming and Mei Yingzuo are the only Ming thinkers included in the *Gomôjigi*. Jinsai falls back on his own careful readings of the Tang and Song figures Han Yu and Ouyang Xiu for support in his attack on the Neo-Confucian tradition.

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7. 芳松, p. 572.
There was a connection with the move to “solid studies” shixue and away from philosophical speculation in China and Japan. The learned scholar Zhu Shunshui (1600-1682), a contemporary of Gu Wenwu and supporter of the Southern Ming dynasty, fled to Japan and established himself as a consultant in academic matters to the head of the Mito-han, Tokugawa Mitsukuni. Zhu Shunshui’s introduction of contemporary interpretive practice had a broad influence on the development of Confucianism in Japan; Shunshui’s disillusionment with Wang Yangming idealism, which he associated with the fall of the Ming, and his embrace of practical studies was widely emulated in Japan. Shunshui helped to organize the first rigorous Japanese national history, the Dainihonshi (Great History of Japan).

Although the possible influence of Chinese intellectual on Jinsai should not be dismissed, a close look at Jinsai’s own social background yields a few important insights into his worldview. Jinsai was essentially a self-taught scholar of Confucianism from a wealthy Kyoto merchant family. He read widely in the Chinese Confucian tradition without any particular loyalty to a specific school. Unlike almost any other intellectual of his time in either China or Korea, he never studied for a civil service examination. He did not acquire his knowledge of the classics in preparation for a life-altering test because there was no such system of civil service in Japan. Japan had no governmental structure to reinforce Neo-Confucian ideals or orthodox interpretations. Although there were many attempts to

8. I am reminded that Dai Zhen, the eighteenth century Chinese evidentiary scholar of the Mencius, to whom Jinsai is often compared, was unsuccessful in the examination system of China and developed many of his ideas in relative isolation. It was precisely the alienation from official orthodoxy which made the questioning of its assumptions possible. Dai Zhen was all but unknown before his revival by Hu Shi in the twentieth century. Perhaps Hu Shi was influenced by the Japanese interpretive tradition when he reevaluated Dai Zhen’s Mengzi ziyi suzheng and its historical importance.
break with the teachings of Zhu Xi in China, the need for such a general system of thought in a continent-sized nation, as well as its ensconcement in the examination system, assured its survival. Because neither Jinsai nor any of his disciples were tied to a particular orthodoxy, they developed their own ideas in new directions unthinkable in China. For example, Jinsai praised the close at hand (hikin[日]), and asserted that the vulgar culture of a country was essential to any understanding of humanity. He pointed out that the Shijing (Book of Songs) was itself made up of popular songs. Jinsai’s stress on popular culture, zoku[足], lead to a positive evaluation of popular writers of the period (some of whose work was pornographic in nature). Jinsai’s son Ito Baiu[井原西鶴] devoted much of his scholarly attention to popular culture, and particularly the risque novels of Ihara Saikaku[井原西鶴] (1642-1693) which treat prostitution and homosexuality. Baiu, drawing on Jinsai’s legacy, claimed that because because such writing embodied the spirit of the age, they could be a serious part of his studies.

The Gomōjigi is an attempt to define the basic vocabulary of Confucian discourse in order to remove historically anachronistic interpretations. The format, consisting of a series of short expositions revolving around a specific Neo-Confucian terms, is consciously based the Song philosopher Chen Chun’s[陳淳] work Beixi ziyi[北溪字義]. This format should not mislead the reader, however: from the very start Jinsai denies the metaphysical assumptions inherent in Chen Chun’s writing, who was himself a close associate of Zhu Xi. The most striking aspect of Jinsai’s approach to the perennial question of how to return to the classics is his insistence on the organic quality of language itself. He detected a morphological connectedness, a contiguous flow of meaning in the writings of the Analects and the Mencius, as well as the Six Classics that could not be chopped up by references outwards to metaphysics. The meaning of the classics flowed like a vital essence through veins beneath the surface of the writing. For Jinsai, the careful process of definition, of setting the meanings of words (jigi[義]) straight could not ignore the pulsing of
the arteries (ketsumyakuﬁ) that pumped the text full of meaning. The words of the classics could not be cut out of the linguistic body they formed and treated in a vacuum, but rather must but had to be read for meaning in their context. Jinsai sets forth his view most succinctly in the introduction to the Gomôjigi:

I have always taught my students to read deeply and consider precisely these two books: the Analects and the Mencius; thereby allowing the ideas and the linguistic pulse of the sages to become clear within their own mind’s eye. Then not only will one be able to properly apprehend the meanings and vital pulse of Confucius and Mencius, one will also be able to properly understand the words and therefore avoid great misconceptions.

The meanings of words may be an insignificant aspect of scholarship, but if one just makes one mistake with regards to meanings, the damage will not be minor. One must trace each word back to its context in the Analects and the Mencius, and thus put together the ideas and linguistic pulse before then can one avoid the misconceptions and forced readings that originate from reading in heterogeneous personal ideas.

The analogy to the living body and the interdependency of meaning reveals a remarkable sophistication in a tradition of interpretation dominated by a reliance on imported Chinese glosses. Jinsai relied on Chinese dictionaries, in particular the Ming Dictionary zihuiﬁ of Mei Yingzuoﬁ, but he had a fine sense of the need for context in approaching the classics. He saw, as did structural linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, that a word was meaningful only as a function of its interaction with other words around it. Jinsai also suggests an awareness of the need to internalize the classics within the mind of
the specific reader: to make the text something within oneself. Jinsai
attacked the artificial but convenient process of kundoku precisely
because it destroyed the possibility of actually internalizing the
ancient language. To do so one had to realize that the domain pre-
vously considered secondary, the field of linguistics considered pre-
viously a minor field (xiaoxue小學), was of primary importance, an
aspect of Jinsai’s work resonant with the Kaozheng movement of
contemporaneous China.

Jinsai comes back to this point again at the close of the Gomôjigi
with a discussion of the language of the Six Classics:

The study of the Six Classics must begin with the obtainment
of a general sense of their words’ import. If one first obtains a gen-
eral sense of their import, then one can follow down along the
flow of the words; follow the road and progress. Then there will
not be anything that is difficult to understand. The Six Classics
cannot be compared to other books whose phrases must be
combed through and chapters sifted out. Following along each
word in order, they can be explained and fully comprehended.

Thus human feelings are completely expressed in the Book of
Songs; political events are fully revealed in the Book of Documents;
the evolution of events is fully revealed in the Book of Changes; the
vicissitudes of society are fully expressed in the Spring and
Autumn Annals.

(p. 159)

Jinsai detects a flow beneath the surface of the text which must be
first uncovered and then followed in order to understand the words
within the contours of the ancient language. As most any reader of a
foreign language has experienced, texts that will not reveal their
meanings to careful scrutiny of each word, can suddenly become
transparent when the import or argument is apprehended. Such an
approach based on the internal structure of classical Chinese usage, however, leads directly to a denial of any attempt to adopt the Chinese tradition to the specifics of the current social structure through active reinterpretation of the classics. Jinsai constructed a wall between the important project of governing and the philological study of texts in search of original meanings.

The contextual nature of language and the phenomena it represents is related to the importance of change and transformation in Jinsai’s thought. Jinsai began the *Gomôjigi* with a careful explication of the constantly evolving nature of the way. He makes the point that the alternation between the *yin* and *yang* (according to the *Book of Changes*) that forms the way, *dao*, is exactly a process of change and not the combination of two abstract concepts of *yin* and *yang*. He stresses the active verbal nature of the expression “*yī yīn yī yang*” いいいい いい. These words describing the process of becoming should not be reconstructed as static metaphysical terms, which can be manipulated out of context.9

It is particularly telling that Jinsai uses the term *ryûkô* or “flowing” to describe the nature of the way, for this is exactly the term that his contemporary, the haiku poet Matsuo Bashô, employed to describe the ideal of haiku poetry composition. The fascination with a constantly transforming conception of language in haiku, or in the prose of Ihara Saikaku, also clearly extended into the reading of the Chinese classics in the late-seventeenth century. In this sense, Jinsai was part of a larger intellectual movement.

For Jinsai, the denial of the constantly evolving nature of human

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9. Jinsai clearly sees the confusion of the active verbal expression with a static, dead metaphysical concept as the legacy of the Song Neo-Confucian hermeneutic tradition. It seems more likely that it was rather the misinterpretation of the writings of Zhu Xi by earlier Japanese philosophers against which he reacted. There was a clear propensity towards flattening out the Chinese tradition in Japan as a result of the lack of context for early Japanese readers. An analysis of the Song conception of the relationship between processes and abstract terms is beyond the scope of this paper.
experience by the Neo-Confucian tradition results in an inhuman morality. The evolving natural pattern of human behavior was summed up for Jinsai in the concept of desire (yoku). An understanding of desire was critical to the proper fitting of morality with human interaction. Neo-Confucians, according to Jinsai, held up the absence of desire (muyoku), as an ideal, and thereby went directly against the natural ties between men that determine moral action. Jinsai saw the application of Buddhist terms such as the “clear mirror” in the Neo-Confucian suggestion that the heart should be cleared of feelings until it resembles an empty reflective mirror. For Jinsai such thinking was simply (empty nothingness) inherently contrary to the human heart. The heart must “be a living thing like a plant; a active thing like flowing water” (p. 231), and not a dead empty object.

Jinsai attributed the misconception of human nature as a static object to the metaphysics of Song Neo-Confucianism and its deviation from the realm of the concrete and close at hand. The justification for moral action in terms of a conception of an abstract “nature” (sei) which under-girds all decisions obscures the fact that the ultimate source of such action exists in the specificity of the individual. Thus the treatment of goodness at a remove from action was in fact equivalent to the absence of goodness.

In the end (the ideas of Neo-Confucians) end up falling into the realm of theories of the absence of both good and evil. This misconception springs from their insistence on separating substance and function (tai and yô) while remaining ignorant of the fact that in the teachings of Confucius and Mencius, arguments are focused on the moral arousal of the human heart, and have no foundation in any metaphysical conception of a distinction between the still unexpressed and already expressed. They did

10. Tai and yô (or ti and yong in Chinese) are essential concepts in the Neo-Confucian tradition. Tai, or substance was the metaphysical aspect of things and yô its material specificity.
To describe an abstract structure that is responsible for the actions of men such as the functioning of the “still unexpressed” (mihatsu) and the “already expressed” (ihatsu) is to assign a primacy to transcendent abstractions and recognize human actions as mere manifestations of that hidden principle, ri. Because the focus of moral action is thus displaced from actual situations, it does not have anything to do with a conception of goodness as a commitment to specific actions in daily life.

The rhetoric of Jinsai’s analysis of past mistakes in the Confucian tradition is powered by a careful opposition of the two poles: emptiness, (kyo), and substance (jitsu). Jinsai is not simply arguing that emptiness, or insubstantiality, is a consistent negative and thus substance should be found in all aspects of inquiry. Rather he is attacking those who under Taoist and Buddhist influence, which he considered pernicious, took terms that were rightfully insubstantial and treated them as if they were concrete. In a sense his criticism resembles pragmatic attacks on the Western Philosophical tradition concerning the terms being and non-being and the danger of reification. Such criticism asserts that it is because “being” has mistakenly been treated as if it was a noun, rather than a verb that a whole area of study developed at complete remove from any actual phenomenon. According to Jinsai, it was the “emptiness, detachment, and self-transformation” (kyomu tendan jika) of Taoist and Buddhist thought that had lead Confucianism away from a concern with immanent reality.

Jinsai’s discussion of the meaning of the term mei (fate, order, mandate) involves a careful distinction between a substantive usage as a noun, which he describes as “heavy”, and a verbal usage which he describes as “light.” The phrase from the Book of Changes
“In life and death there is fate” (命) and from the Analects “At fifty, I knew the mandate of heaven” (50 50 命) are examples of the substantial, heavy, use of “mei.” By contrast, in the phrase from Mencius “That which heaven gives me” (天與 yo) is verbal, not substantive. Jinsai continues,

Now the expression “heaven orders (mei) that which known as nature” as is found in the Zhongyong is an example of insubstantial [verbal] usage. It would be the same as saying “heaven gives (yo) that which is known as nature”. If we were to take this example of mei and apply it to the example of a substantial such as “seimei” (命仮名 assigned nature), the meaning would be incomprehensible. This is because the word itself has usages as both a substantial and an insubstantial (verb). In the case of the mei in seimei, it is a substantial. However the [later] theories of “That which heaven commands is known as nature in the domain of man” arise from an ignorance of the fact that the mei in the Zhongyong is fact an insubstantial word and not a substantial word. To take the word mei and establish two different meanings is uncalled for. How much more so to confuse an insubstantial with a substantial! The mistake is immense.

For Jinsai, recognizing the activity implied in the insubstantial word kyoji, is the first step towards understanding what is substantial in immanent reality, e.g. what should be the foundation of substantial scholarship, jitugakushi. By contrast, the acceptance of the insubstantial kyoji as a substantial thing is the beginning of insubstantial and useless kyomushi speculation. The degree of Bud-

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11. A verbal or adjectival usage.
dhist influence in Chinese Neo-Confucianism is clear from the vehemence with which Jinsai attacks it.

Jinsai’s writing is full of vivid concrete metaphors and analogies which seek to overturn the abstract rhetoric of the Neo-Confucian tradition using a rhetoric of the obvious. The contextual and interactive nature of language are reflected in a materialist vision of the universe calculated to explain that the perceived is the ultimate reality and requires no philosophical superstructure, no metaphysical levers and cranks, to sustain it. He presents the universe as a simple box in his description of the way of heaven (tendô):

So what does the statement mean that there is one original ether between heaven and earth? This matter cannot be understood through empty words. Allow me to elucidate by means of a metaphor. Let us suppose we were to build a box now by assembling of six planks, the top sealing it shut. Then there would naturally be ether filling its interior. There being such ether present, naturally white molds would develop, and then maggots would spring forth. This is the principle of natural development.

Now upon consideration, heaven and earth themselves form an enormous box. Yin and yang form the ether within the box and the myriad things of the world are the white mold and maggots that arise. This is the nature of ether. There is not something else that it follows when emerging, and nothing it follows when appearing. If the box exists, then the ether is there. If there were no box, there would be ether. Thus we understand in the space between heaven and earth there is nothing beyond this original ether. It is evident that there is no such condition as “first existed principle and then this ether was produced.”

(p. 116).
The universe is reduced to a contextual construction defined by its discrete parts. Just as the box exists only because it is limned by its sides, so the universe exists as the sum of its parts. There is no need for some more fundamental principle (rt), to proceed the materiality of phenomenon. That box defines the ether within the box: no box; no ether. The vividness of the image presented should not distract us from the fact that Jinsai is himself being quite rhetorical here—for his simple model of the universe in which all living things are like the mold growing in a box does not solve all metaphysical issues. The reader might want to find a “principle” underlying the ether as it existed in the box. Rather his rhetoric works so effectively because of its claim to be immediate and obvious. In much the same way, the highly abstract transcendent reality beneath the surface of everyday phenomenon to which Zhu Xi appealed was originally convincing because such abstraction carried more authority. Now it is the appeal to things as they are that drives the rhetoric of a Confucian scholar well versed in all its abstractions.

Neo-Confucianism has lost the true way, according to Jinsai, because of the emphasis it has placed on self-cultivation and reclusion, both actions contrary to the realm of moral action deeply rooted in the concrete daily experiences of human interaction. Moral behavior must always be transitive in nature and never reflexive. Thus the treatment of “reverence” (kei) as a state to be maintained without a particular subject of action by Zhu Xi was the subject of attack for Jinsai. In defining chû (earnestness in its original meaning, and not loyalty) and jo (open-mindedness), Jinsai declares,

The way of the sages takes the response to people and the handling of events as its exclusive responsibility. There is no need to be tranquil as a means of maintaining the heart or to hold on to reverence. Benevolence and rightness are truly the basic stuff of the way. The accomplishment of earnestness and open-mindedness also cannot be achieved without being grounded in benevolence and rightness. As for responding to people and handling events, earnestness and open-mindedness are essential.
The sage conducts himself within the bounds of daily intercourse without recourse to a pursuit of enlightenment or self-betterment not also founded in that daily intercourse. There is nothing is static in the sage who, like heaven and earth, is a katsubutsu (vital moving thing).

The Book of Songs is also a vital and ever changing object of inquiry for the scholar. Jinsai’s conception of the contextual nature of meaning within the songs themselves reminds us that he explication of the meaning of words does not preclude an understanding of the variety of interpretations of the same text possible even in antiquity. Nor does the multiplicity collapse for the modern reader, for the song will have a different significance for different readers. In his attempt to peel away layers of misinterpretation in search of the original significance of words, the careful philologist is not misled into ignoring the protean nature of language and therefore postulating fixed meanings to ancient words.

Jinsai takes issue with the later attempts to assign specific unchanging meanings to the six forms of poetry in the Book of Songs: the feng, fu, bi, xing, ya, and song. In particular, he singles out Cheng Yi’s theory of “three form the warp and three form the woof” for attack. Cheng Yi attempted to fix set meanings to song by claiming such meanings were inherent in the nature of the poem. For Jinsai, the significance of the song is a product of a particular reader. Jinsai continues,

The principle for reading the Book of Songs is that what is good in poems will inspire and bring forth the heart of goodness in men and what is ill in the Book of Songs will admonish the errant wills.

12. The liuyi, or rokug, are taken to mean stylistic forms, by Jinsai.
of men. This is most certain. As for the use [significance] of songs, in principle it is not to be found in the original intention of the writer [singer]. So what is it that inspires the reader? The nature of the songs is such that they have a thousand types and ten thousand forms. The more of the song that comes out the more limitless are its possibilities. When those of refinement read it, then it will find refined meanings. When those of lower status read it, then it will find commoner meanings. Whether the poem has the roundness of earth or the squareness of heaven, meanings will follow from how the poem strikes the reader. Whether vast or minute, this will follow from how it reveals itself to the reader. The 

The nature of linguistic signification in the Book of Songs, and by implication in all writing, is radically contingent on the nature of the reader himself. The songs are significant in the specificity of the response they evoke in us, but such significance cannot be fixed in the words. The interpreter will lose sight of meanings if he insists on the original intention. Jinsai takes the example of the Tangdai poem (which does not survive to the present day) quoted by Confucius in the Zihan chapter. Confucius employs this poem out of its original context with emphasis on the longing implied. The original poem is clearly a love poem, but Confucius quotes the poem to explain that the failure of the individual to obtain what he wills lies with himself just as the lover narrator of the poem is to blame for not seeing the beloved.  

The poem originally (it is inferred) was an

14. "The flowers of the cherry tree, how they wave about! It’s not that I did
explicit love poem, but its meaning has been transformed through this later usage. Jinsai also cites examples in the Zuozhan of how older poems were made to be either eulogistic or parodic (meici) in later usage, irrespective of their original meanings.

As stressed above, the contextual nature of language is an important strand in Jinsai’s thought; it is most interesting that when it impinges on his explanation of philosophical matters which are not tied directly to a textural source. For example, just as the word in a text derives its significance from its position, and not from some innate meaningfulness, the righteous person is also ultimately contextual. Jinsai explains,

As for the way, it is a shared and public in nature and not limited to the individual feelings of one person. Thus it follows that when heaven does away with the cruel it is benevolence, and to dispose of the injurious on behalf of heaven is rightness. If Tang had not deposed Jie, or if King Wu had not waged war against Zhou, and neither Jie nor Zhou had repented of his evil, then certainly there would have been someone like Tang or King Wu who would have risen and smote them. If no one on high took initiative, then it would be someone from below. If one particular person could not accomplish it, then heaven would accomplish it.

The sage kings of the past act as grammatical particles in the language of history. The grammar of Heaven’s will determines that the unjust shall be overthrown, and such a grammar will define the actions of the people. If Tang or Wu had not existed, some other per-

not think of you, but your home is so far away.’ The master commented, ‘did not really think of her, if he did, there is no such thing as being far away.’”
son would have filled their place and performed their function. There is nothing innate in the righteous king himself, only his contextual significance. Moral action forms a perfect analogy to the function of the ancient word. Jinsai set the stage for Ogyû Sorai’s radical assertion that Confucian teaching should not focus on interior virtue: if the sage seems a sage, that is sufficient.

Jinsai makes an important distinction between the Four Classics, which serve as material for understanding principles of correct action, but do not state them explicitly, and Analects or Mencius, which make the principles of morality their explicit end. For example Jinsai did not think that Confucius had entered moral judgment in the writing and editing of the Spring and Autumn Annals, as was commonly related in Confucian teachings, but rather had considered the weight of history alone to be sufficient to scare malefactors. In reading the Four Classics, Jinsai suggests, one must read Analects and Mencius first in order to understand the basic principles of ancient thought. Here Jinsai most explicitly relies on the Song Neo-Confucian tradition he otherwise condemns. There is no innate reason to privilege Analects and Mencius over other documents. Jinsai is adopting Cheng Yi’s interpretive strategy when he states that we find in the Four Books “facts” (jijitsu) and not “principles of right action” (giri). The metaphor of the painting he employs, however, gives the argument new resonance:

The Book of Songs, the Book of Documents, the Book of Changes, and the Spring and Autumn Annals do not speak of principles of proper action, but have such principles of proper action inherently within them. In the case of texts that discuss the principles of proper action [such as Analects and Mencius] one can study them and then learn from them. In the case of texts that have the principles of proper action inherently within them, one must think and

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15. Jinsai’s argument is not fully convincing because the Book of Documents is similar to the Analects in its format. The Book of Documents consists of statements concerning how to act, not just a descriptions of events.
then derive those principles. [Section omitted] In those texts about which one must think and then derive the principles of proper action, they remain hidden within and are not overtly stated.

The Four Books are like a natural thing; there is no need to chisel and polish. They are meant to be observed in their natural state. The Analects and Mencius present us with a scale and ruler to assess the weight and length of all under heaven. The six classics are like a painting; the Analects and Mencius are like the laws of painting technique. After one has learned the laws of painting, the basic principle of painting will be clear. There has never been a case of not understanding the laws of painting, and still understanding the basic principle of painting.

The Four Books are considered natural things, such as an unpolished jade, and not human structures defined by rhetoric. The fact that humans create such documents is not doubted, but there are several forms of language (with an implied historical distinction) that must be distinguished within them. The writings of Mencius and Confucius serve as a gloss to the larger ancient body of writings. The issue of glosses has been displaced to a meta-level. The older language is dependent on the later writings of Confucius and Mencius for elaboration, just as our readings of those two, in turn, are dependent on Jinsai’s explication.

The analogy of the writings of the two later masters to a ruler and scale is not a new one; comparing the Four Books to a painting and the Analects and the Mencius to the laws of painting is an original move. The inner order of a painting is not immediately obvious because the purpose of painting is to record the appearance of things, (jijitsu). Yet there are clear techniques embodied in painting, which, once mastered will give the observer an apprecia-
tion of the order held within that simple representation. Painterly
technique does not draw attention to itself, because the focus of
painting is elsewhere. Nevertheless, those laws allow the observer to
read the painting more profoundly. The analogy is important
because it does not resort to a metaphysical or transcendent device
behind quotidian reality that delivers universal truths. The laws of
painting bring together all the seemingly unordered aspects of the
image observed, but make no appeal to a metaphysical truth.

Jinsai’s theories rest on a profound conception of the historicity
of language, even within antiquity. He notes that the term “the
profound person,” kunshi, originally indicated class status, but
was later transformed by Confucius into a general term suggesting
one adhering to high standards of conduct. Similarly, the Book of
Changes took on its profundity because of the rereading of it by Con-
fucius in a philosophical context. It was originally, however, only a
divination manual (which had little value for Jinsai). Jinsai declares
that Confucius has surpassed the ancients through this new inter-
pretation of extent words. That is to say that Jinsai accepts a radical
transformation of the tradition by the master Confucius. The new
reading of the Book of Changes is what “makes my master far above
the sages of the three ages and the eternal original teacher for ten-
thousand generations” (p. 153).

Yet the recognition of the importance of historical shifts in lan-
guage in antiquity does not stop Jinsai from attacking later inter-
pretations for offering new or heterogeneous ideas.16 The recogni-
tion of creative reinterpretation in the works of Mencius and Con-
fucius combines with the denial of such “misinterpretation” in
later ages, to reveal a strange closure of the discourse at the very
point at which the “laws of painting” were established: the time of
Mencius. Up until that point, it was still possible to present radical

16. For example Cheng Yi’s employment of Zhuangzi’s term “chungmo
wuzhen” from the Yingdiwang chapter (quoted on p. 35 of Goji).
reinterpretations.

The manner in which Jinsai elucidates the difference between Confucius and Mencius suggests the process of closure as Jinsai conceived of it:

As for the principles of benevolence, rightness, ritual, and wisdom, the student should look on the arguments of Mencius as annotations. Amongst the direct students of Confucius, the terms benevolence, rightness, ritual, and wisdom were as common to everyone as tea and rice. Thus there was no doubt amongst them as to what was meant. Thus the disciples only asked about the means to get to these goals, and the master answered them in terms of the means to get to these goals. There was never any discussion of the meaning of these terms. Thus one cannot today get the principles by relying on the words of Confucius.

By the time of Mencius, however, the sages were far off and the way was occluded. Not only did students not practice the way of benevolence, rightness, ritual, and wisdom, they did not even understand what they were. Thus Mencius earnestly and lucidly propounded their principles for students. [In Mencius’s writing] the origins and details are pointed out; every facet is without omission. The student must base his studies in the Mencius and investigate the principles of right behavior there. Then he can comprehend the Analects.

The virtues were assumed to be known as well as any common item around the house in the time of Confucius and thus did not require definition. Definition is a product of the loss of integration between proper action and everyday life, and the accompanying decay of
language. Thus Mencius (and here Mencius is clearly a model for Jinsai himself) had to define the most basic moral terms in the explicit manner required by a student of the present fallen age. Such explanations are necessary to comprehend the Analects, which in turn serves as a key, or gloss, for the Four Books.

Jinsai reveals something of the inner paradox of his interpretive approach. If the kundoku system is to be condemned because it keeps the language of the ancients at a distance, is not the presence of Mencius as an unwelcome interlocutor between the older truths and the present world analogous to the same sort of linguistic violence? It was exactly this privileging of the Mencius that would be the focus of Ogyû Sorai’s attack on Jinsai in the early-eighteenth century. The term “rhetoric” (gironï¬), employed by Jinsai in his attack on later Neo-Confucianism was then taken by Sorai and applied to Mencius himself. The dangers of stripping away later ages of antiquity in a search for something more original was made clear in the late eighteenth century when the Nativist scholar Motoori Norinaga attacked the whole Confucian project as mere rhetoric detached from the real experience of the Japanese, and thus advocated a return to Japan’s cultural roots.

We cannot help sensing a strange isomorphic relationship between the need to master the principles of Mencius before going on to the Analects, and the Neo-Confucian assumption of the primacy of principle over material stuff that Jinsai attacks. Let us return to Jinsai’s example of the box. Jinsai set up the anecdote of the box to attack Zhu Xi’s assertion that principle must have preceded material stuff: “You li erhoul shen siqi” (êó×âì»ý­ßæÞÙ婕). Yet Jinsai discovers that in the course of his argument he must, paradoxically, repeatedly employ the word ri in a sense akin to Zhu Xi’s usage. Even though Jinsai stresses that ri had only the specific meaning of dead patterns in stone in the discussions of the ancients, he must speak of garîûþ×â, the principle of painting, in the previous analogy. He is forced to admit something resembling Zhu Xi’s principle even as he denies it. Jinsai tells the reader that he must embrace the principle (li×â) of
right action, as explained in *Mencius* before he can deal with the materiality of the *Analects*, or of the Six Classics.

Jinsai’s critique of the abstract Neo-Confucian tradition and his rhetoric of the self-evident is a strategy to convert the established orthodoxy into heterodoxy by showing its newness. Taking the position of a sensible reader approaching the text as it is, Jinsai sought to cut through the hermeneutic fog surrounding the classics in order to assert his own viewpoint. It is remarkable how certain Jinsai is of his own ability to read correctly, and begs the question unanswered in the *Gomôjigi*: why has only Jinsai suddenly know the original meanings?

Jinsai never uses his extensive knowledge to overwhelm the reader; he never claims an authority other than common sense. Rather he develops his arguments so as to stress that the philosophical issues he raises can be understood by anyone. Since human nature and experience are universal in his view, he always assumes a reader capable of understanding his argument, and the classics. He recognizes no absolute gap between the sage and the average man such as he saw in later Neo-Confucian hagiographical treatments of the ancients. He declares: “The word “sagely” (sei ), was used to describe virtue obtained, or the nature of the person; it was not employed as in later ages to describe an absolute division into distinct classes.\(^{17}\) The sage is human and humane, not superhuman. Whereas it was previously rhetorically more convincing to claim superhuman qualities for the sages in the Neo-Confucian tradition, that claim has now become a liability.

Jinsai also asserts that there is no such thing as privileged knowledge or a privileged class of explicators. Here he is certainly responding the attempt to use knowledge as a means of asserting authority found especially in the early Neo-Confucian tradition of Japan dominated by Buddhist monasteries. Such a movement can also be detected in the Hayashi school of Confucianism sponsored

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\(^{17}\) *Ito Jinsai’s Search for the Meaning of the Chinese Classics; a Revolution in Japanese Confucianism* (p. 150).
by the Shogunate. In the Hayashi School, Confucianism was a means of supporting and reinforcing the distinction between the samurai class and the commoner class. The interpretive tradition gave the members of the school a special understanding beyond the common man.

Jinsai attacks such an interpretive tradition when he quotes Zhu Xi’s pronouncement, “The sage did not need to speak of the mandate, it was merely for those below the mean that this term must be used”\(^{18}\) as an example of the misguided attempt to create a distinction in discourse between the sage and the commoner. Words are accessible to anyone. The spread of printing for the first time in Jinsai’s lifetime is tied to this interpretation.

Jinsai was concerned with uncovering truths, which could be universally applied. Unlike many philosophical texts of earlier periods, his work was meant for publication and wide circulation, not for seclusion as a school’s secret teaching. The universalism of Jinsai’s philosophy is clearly exhibited in the following passage explaining the nature of the way:

Mencius said, “The way is like a great byway. How can it be difficult to know?” As for this so-called great byway, those of high and low rank, the respected and the humble, all pass by it.

[Section omitted]

From kings, nobles, and officials above, down to peddlers, stable boys, the lame and the blind, there is none that does not pass by this way. If only the kings, nobles, and officials can pass by something and the common man or woman cannot, then it is not the way.

[Section omitted]

As for the theories of “Zen” Confucians in recent years, they consist

\(^{18}\) 参考文献 (p. 120).
of principles that are empty, insubstantial and hard to pin down.
They prefer theories that are inaccessible, rarefied, and unreal.

The way is universal; it is in the most perfect sense the way of man. There is no one, neither peddlers nor cripples, who does not follow this way. If there were someone who did not, that way would not be by its very definition the true way. Jinsai’s argument deviates from the standard position taken by Neo-Confucian writers from the samurai tradition. They had argued that the way is something mysterious that can only be obtained through practice—a form of discourse closely related to the need for constant training in martial affairs associated with the samurai tradition.

The full import of Jinsai’s definition of the way is not fully clear, however, until Jinsai returns to what he sees as the real shortcomings of the Confucian tradition as it existed in Japan. He writes, “As for the theories of ‘Zen’ advocated by Confucians in recent years, they consist of principles that are empty, insubstantial and hard to pin down. They prefer theories that are inaccessible, rarefied, and unreal.” The abstractions of the early Neo-Confucian tradition in Japan were aimed at exclusivity; the insubstantial and abstract nature of their speculation was aimed at limiting the readership for these texts and reaffirming the samurai’s position. Jinsai’s contumely is reserved for those philosophers who cut themselves off from human society for the purpose of self-cultivation by “hiding away in mountains and forests and sitting in silence purifying their hearts.”

The entire definition of the way and the means to attain it has clearly

19. Here, and elsewhere, it is difficult to tell whether Jinsai is referring to China or to Japan.
20. (p. 123).
shifted.

This paper discusses something of the close connection between Jinsai’s focus on linguistic issues in his analysis of the *Analects* and the *Mencius* and the import of his own philosophical stance of focusing on the near at hand (*hikin*). It was essential to Jinsai’s rhetoric that he not falls back on unsupportable metaphysical assumptions. The concreteness of the examples he uses to describe the universe, or human interactions find a neat parallel within his common-sense approach to linguistic issues.

We should not be fooled, however, into thinking that Jinsai merely presents us things as they are. At the very same time the Jinsai tries to relegate the term “principle” (*rì*) to the static patterning in inanimate stone, he is forced to fall back on exactly this word in his many arguments—often using it in a manner which suggests a metaphysical significance. Jinsai eliminates what he sees as overly metaphysical aspects of the *Daxue* and the *Book of Documents* by suggesting those texts are corrupt. Such arguments although argued in philological terms, are self-justifying. It is clear that Jinsai started his reading of the Confucian classics with an anti-metaphysical stance. Jinsai attempts to limit certain readings of the classics, out of a multiplicity of possible interpretations, that he deems too detached from things as they are. At the same time, Jinsai maintains that the significance of a work lies in the individual experience of the reader. He thus avoids making his own teachings overly dogmatic, and thus internally contradictory, while at the same time establishing a compelling reading.