The Essence of *Li* (Rites) and Its Modern Significance

By Ogyu Sorai

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Abstract: Ogyu Sorai, a seventeenth-eighteenth century Confucian scholar of Japan during the Tokugawa Shogunate, developed his own unique interpretation of the dynasties ruled by the ancient Chinese sage emperors and later dynastic generations. He sought the essential elements in governing people in *li* (rites). Turning to the contemporary Tokugawa society at that time in Japan, he published his own commentaries and recommendations for a stable society and generation by applying the principle of rites. Sorai argued a society based on the principle of rites would bring stability to the people and benevolence to the administration. Sorai more specifically argued about the application of the principle of rites to suppress the luxurious life in society to stabilize society and the effects of rites in educating the people on social norms.

Keywords: Essence of *Li* (Rites), Achievements of Ogyu Sorai, Japanese type labor-intensive agriculture educational effects
Introduction

Ogyu Sorai (1666-1728), a Confucian scholar during the Tokugawa period (1603-1868), scrutinized how ancient Chinese sages developed rites and music and how these could have a positive significance in Tokugawa society, far removed in time and geography. Sorai’s investigation led him to recommend systematic reform of the Shogunate. Discussing his ideas will offer us useful suggestions to in modern times in investigating the aforementioned question. For this reason I have decided to choose Sorai views for discussion. I hope that this report would provide some usefulness for the participants.

Achievements of Ogyu Sorai
and the Background of His Times (An Outline)

Ogyu Sorai, a Confucian scholar during the middle Tokugawa period served Yanagisawa Yoshiyasu, a favorite subject of the fifth Shogun, Tokugawa Tsunayoshi. (1646-1709). Sorai compiled Yakubun Zentei (A Chinese-Japanese Dictionary of Synonyms), Kenroku (A Treatises on Military Sciences), Meiritsu Kokujikai (A Japanese Translation Ming Penal Codes), and Sorai-shu (Collection of Sorai Writings). All these works are achievements in the field. Representative of his interpretation of Chinese Confucian classics and his attempts for systematization are Bendo (Distinguishing the Ways), Benmei (Distinguishing the Names), and Rongocho (Commentaries on the Analect of Confucius). And, he criticized the scholarship of the Song period (960-1279) and Ito Jinsai (1627-1705). Sorai established his own unique Confucian scholarship theories. These works were transmitted to China and Korea. In his late years in response to the inquiries of the eighth ShogunYoshimune, he submitted Taiheisaku (Pacification Policy) and Seidan (Political Proposals), pointing to specific measures for scholarship and institutional reforms. His Confucian scholarship theories were directly related to the large socio-
economic changes in the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century that Japan underwent. First of all I will outline above changes in the following paragraphs.

During this period in Japan under the Tokugawa Shogunate peace was restored and local lords in various parts of Japan launched flood control and irrigation projects for the improvement of agriculture, which contributed to the large-scale opening of new rice fields. Also, breed improvement made progress, and farming techniques were advanced. This, in turn, led to the remarkable rise in agricultural productivity. The base of Japanese-type labor-intensive agriculture was reportedly laid down during this period. And during this period the production of commercial crops such as tobacco, rape-seed, and cotton flourished. The use of the tatami-mat was disseminated to the civilian population. The common people had three square meals per day, and used cotton bedding at night; thus shows the boost in their living standards. Supported by such economic affluence, “farming guides” for the improvement and dissemination of farming techniques were published to acquire a wide audience. This also was an indication that literature was quite getting popular among farmers.

On the other hand, throughout this period the Shogunate disbursed a large amount of gold and silver coins for the reconstruction of the great fire of Yedo (Tokyo) (1698) and new construction of temples, shrines, and mansions, and their repairs were carried out. As a result the Shogunate was forced to carry out a currency reform. Yet, the Shogunate continued to issue new currency, causing the finances of the Shogunate and various fiefs to deteriorate. In general, however, commerce was developed, the money economy began to penetrate the society, and national markets emerged which were centered at Yedo, Osaka, and Kyoto.

Briefly, at this time Japan experienced a great transformation from a natural economy to a money economy. Symbolic of this was the expansion and transformation of Yedo. The census of Yedo revealed that the people living in the town area were over half a mil-
lion, and with that of samurai warriors added, the total population reportedly surpassed the one million mark. With the spread of the money economy, social mobility was heightened, which resulted into a large influx of rural population towards cities. Moreover, the lives of city dwellers were guided by money in every aspect. Sorai referred this to ‘like a hotel life forced to purchase the necessities with money.’ Out of this situation a kind of mass society prematurely appeared in Yedo. To put it in a different way, the face-to-face relations of the community collapsed, and self-centered living style what Ogyu Sorai called ‘each person caring only for oneself’ spread. Human relations became more formal and a kind of ‘privatization’ evolved. Even in the case of domestic servants in samurai families and townspeople families it brought a significant change and created a different kind of relationship predominantly of the migrant worker type with a yearly contract. Their relations were bound not by gratitude and friendship but by selfishness. Such changes in human relations went hand-in-hand with rampant rise of luxury in food, shelter, and clothing and various changes in living style. Differing from village communities, people did not know who their next-door neighbors were, with the consequence rise in urban-type crimes as swindling were frequent occurrences. Indeed, it was in such an era of rapid urbanization Sorai sought to establish Confucian teachings centered around the concept of rites.

Various Opportunities in Ogyu Sorai’s Discourse on ‘Rites’

Rites Were An Institution Formulated by Emperors Yao and Shun

According to Sorai, ‘moral principle’ was a norm formulated by the ancient sages. But this does not imply that the sages established it arbitrarily. According to Sorai, the sages ‘possessed the virtue of wisdom and intelligence, were familiar with the principles of Heaven
and Earth, exhaustively studied the nature of persons, and manufactured something.’ (Sei in Benmei) What Sorai here refers to are the words from Shuo Kua in Yi (The Book of Change) that ‘thoroughly investigating principles and exploiting nature.’ Sorai interprets this as referring to the action that the sages took to investigate principles and exploit nature. In other words, although endowed with superhuman wisdom, the sages also observed Heaven, Earth, and universe in order to discover ‘the principle of Heaven and Earth,’ and discovered qualities possessed by things that are useful to human life. On the other hand, the sages clarified the primary (human) nature of men and the psychological tendency (human psychological inclinations). Sorai is said to have formulated the ‘principle’ by combining with a delicate balance to suit both the objective and the subjective conditions. (Gi in Benmei). His purpose in this was to realize the political value of ‘stabilizing the people and benevolent rule.’

In this regard the principle of Heaven and Earth contains such laws and regulations as exchanging the old for the new and the fact that there were a few noblemen and many plain people. On one hand, he mentioned that when human psychological inclinations are given free rein, life tends to become naturally luxurious and gaudy. He says that human nature common to everyone includes ‘a capacity for mutual love, mutual fostering, mutual assistance, and mutual growth and a talent for managing work.’ (Jin in Benmei). And he said that ‘nature is particular with every man’ in regard to the distinctive individuality of each man (Toku in Bunme). According to Sorai, the sages established, in keeping with human nature, the mean virtues such as filial piety to one’s parents and respect and love to elder brothers, loyalty, and trust common to every one and to the ruler and the ruled. He established the large virtues for the ruler such as wisdom, benevolence, and courage in contrast to individuality. He thus sought the base for the universal validity of the principle in the constant and changeless nature throughout ages and places that belong to the ‘principle of Heaven and Earth,’ the ‘nature of the individual’ and ‘human wisdom’ clarified by the sages in their ‘investi-
According to Sorai, the way was historically developed or changed. Ancient sages such as Fu Xi, Shen Nong, and the Yellow Emperor established the foundation of the way of ‘utilization and public welfare.’ Concretely it was the technology and knowledge concerning human welfare such as the method of finding foodstuffs like farming, fishing, and hunting, the manufacturing of clothing, the construction of houses, the invention of tools, and medicine. All these were attributed to the inventions of the ancient sages. Then, in contrast it is said that only during the era of Yao and Shun were the concepts of rites and music as the way of ‘proper virtue’ conceived. Thereafter, it is said that succeeding dynasties ruled people with rites and music, and maintained order and good customs. Then, according to Sorai, when Confucius edited Shuijing (The Book of Documents) he started with Yao and Shun and ignored the sages. In the human history the concept of rites and music did not historically exist but was developed by Yao and Shun.

The Universality and Particularity of Rites

How did Sorai interpret the fact that the contents of rites and music were altered by succeeding dynasties? According to him, the way of rites and music as stated by Yao and succeeded by Shun did not become universal until Wu (Commentaries on the Analects, 4). At that point the concept of rites established by the Hsia Dynasty founded by Wu became a model for succeeding dynasties in formulating rites and music. However, this does not imply that it was adhered to in the succeeding dynasties such as Yin and Zhou. That is to say, each dynasty established the concept of rites and music to suit the historical condition in which they were placed. According to Sorai, it was the meaning of the phrase, “adjusting to the change in the objective condition.” (Governing in Commentaries on the Analects)

If we take the above facts into account, we can understand that Sorai contemplated that there were two levels in the adaptability of
rites. The first level is the method for ruling people as established by Yao and Shun based on the ‘principle of Heaven and Earth’ and on ‘human nature.’ At this point the course adopted by Yao and Shun becomes universally valid forever and for generations to come. (Sei in Benmei) However, different from this, another level is conceivable in which each dynasty establishes rites and music suitable to the particular condition each dynasty is in. Thus the founder of the dynasties such as King Tang of Yin, Kings of Wu and Wen and the Duke of Zhou established rites and music at the founding of their particular dynasties with policies designed to prolong the life of their dynasties as long as possible and to stabilize the livelihood of people. (Do in Benmei)

In this manner, Sorai formulated a theory, which, while recognizing the universal validity of the “way of Yao-Shun,” also left room for each dynasty founder to formulate independent institutions.

Rites as the Great Way and Their Function of Suppressing Luxury

What kind of effect would rites formed in this way have? To put it differently, why does it have to be rites? To answer this, it is necessary to look at Sorai’s view of history. According to him, it is inevitable that one peaceful reign is to be followed by another full of disturbances. Even a sage cannot avoid this rotation of the heavenly destiny. Accordingly, even the generations of the Hsia, Yin, and Zhou dynasties ruled by the sages finally fell. These dynasties lasted as long as 800 years. In contrast to this, various later dynasties that did not follow the way of the sages lasted at most 300 years or so. What made this difference? Sorai commented that it depends on how a dynasty is rules.

Sorai, who was interested in how to make a dynasty last as long as possible, developed a cyclical view as below as a principle constant throughout the ages. This cycle consists of peace followed by progression in luxurious living, followed by poverty and a separa-
tion of the upper and lower classes, followed by the deteriorating of public order and rampant robberies, then followed by the reappearance of a turbulent period. This historical view of one well-ruled period followed by one turbulent period raises the question of how to check this natural progression. The key point in this is the suppression of the luxurious living and Sorai maintains that a superior method for it is ‘rites and music.’ He emphasizes that this is a high road to fundamentally check luxurious living and is different from legal prohibitions that entail physical coercion and that does not cover all the aspects of life (*Taiheisaku*, op. cit.). Sorai having such a historical view, how did he evaluate the then prevailing world? According to him, following the great turbulence of the Warring States Period the world then was ruled with military prestige, as during the great turbulence all previous institutions were destroyed. Also, since that world was far removed from ancient times, ancient institutions could not be used as they had been. Therefore, customs following the great turbulence were kept without improvement. This led to the deterioration of the social institutions and both upper and lower classes were with no restraint (*Seidan*, Volume 2).

The institutions Sorai is referring to here are those differentiating between the upper and lower classes, between high-ranking and low-ranking fiefs and between high and low grades in everything, including food, clothing and shelter, the ceremonies of coming of age, marriage, funeral, and ancestral worship, other types of ceremonies, gift-giving, correspondence, and retinues. This institution of rites thus established was designed to enforce a public order and to prevent luxury. Sorai viewed that as this was lacking, the practice of luxurious living was advanced, and both the upper and lower classes suffered from poverty.

Sorai anticipated that some would rebut his view by arguing that even in the world of the Tokugawa Period there was a fixed order (status) to differentiate according to status. In response Sorai replied that ‘what you call ‘status’ was a societal custom and was formed spontaneously and bubbled up from below and that it could
not be termed a true institution. According to him, a true institution was ‘set up from above by patterning it after the ancient times, and by planning for the future so as to ultimately enrich the world and remain in peace for a long time to come.’ (Ibid.)

‘Patterning after the ancient times’ refers to that since human psychological inclinations are the same throughout ages and because the sages, being familiar with this, established the institution with this in mind, it is helpful to study the rites of the sages in creating new institutions.’ Planning for the future’ means that in establishing institution from the beginning one must aim at one that lies between luxury and frugality. Sorai argued that since it is natural human psychological inclinations to get attracted toward luxury, if an excessively frugal institution is established at the beginning of an era it will be broken down before long. On the other hand, if an overly luxurious rite is instituted at the outset, the state’s treasury will be exhausted soon and the state will be ruined. For this reason, if, from the beginning, an institution aimed at being between luxury and frugality was established and luxury was prevented, this world would last a long time. Sorai believed that leaders should establish an institution ‘with the foregoing discretion,’ meaning that’ leaders should do so only after worrying about the world and planning for prolonging generations of the peace and calm for all people.’

For the logic for laying the groundwork for such an institution of rites as a differentiating orders Sorai had a specific view as follows on the ‘principles of Heaven and Earth’. Differentiating between a superior and an inferior was not for the purpose of humbling the inferior by the superior. ‘Generally speaking, generating all things between Heaven and Earth has limits.’ ‘Among them the good are few and the evil are numerous. For this reason when an institution is established so as to accommodate the noble people with good things, including even food, clothing, and shelter and the lower people with inferior things it is for the reason that the noble people are few in numbers and the lower people are numerous. If the few people use scarce resources and many people use abundant resources, this is
reasonable, and this creates no problem. The people in Japan use things produced sufficiently in Japan without any shortage. However, when this institution is not established, and many inferior people use few good things, commodity prices will soar, and if good things continue to be supplied to as much as many inferior people want to use, the quality of such good things will gradually deteriorate. Moreover, because the distinction between the upper and the lower strata is lacking, the superior and the inferior become confused, and strife arises from there. ‘And since the human psychological inclinations prefer luxurious things, the world gradually becomes luxurious.’ This was the reality of Yedo society as Sorai observed. This is why Sorai proposed the ‘institution of truth’ comprised of the three opportunities as were mentioned.

The Educational Effects of Rites

In the foregoing we have examined Sorai’s thinking on the effects of checking luxury, that is, on the political effects of prolonging generations for long. However, the excellent point about rites does not stop here. According to Sorai, rites were also the reason for the ‘teachings of the ancient kings’ was ‘the supreme good.’ In other words, rites had the advantage in inculcating people with social norms rather than teaching with words or social ordering with criminal law and other physical punishment.

Sorai maintained this because he understood that ‘rites are things and are full of justice—and their advantage lies in letting people know about it with silence’ (Rei in Benmei). According to Sorai, the sages established rites (things) so as to subsume all the aspects of life and filled them compact with all forms of justice and placed before men as a model so that they could observe them. Then, men became acquainted with it, and came to recognize justice embraced in rites. In that, Sorai maintained, lay the advantage of teaching with rites. Sorai’s interpretation of ‘searching the essence of things so as to expand one’s knowledge to the utmost’ in Great
**Learning** was done from this standpoint. That is, scholars are required to practice long rites (things) established by the sages over many years, identify with them, and through this realize the justice of the sages packed in things, and learn themselves autonomously enlightened wisdom through the practice of rites and music.

‘Generally speaking, the sages do not expound principle with skill. Even if they expound principle, they do so with only in part and wait for the person concerned to realize it by him. The reason for this is that logic taught by others is only superficial and borrowed and useless. Nothing can be learned about logic without practicing it oneself’ (*Taiheisaku*).

As can be understood from the foregoing, when Sorai stressed teaching with rites, this was in contrast to teaching by words. When teaching is done by words people can realize instantly what is being said but never ‘think’ about ‘remainder.’ In other words, that method of teaching entails harmful effects because it does not make people think. In contrast, matters are equal to ‘rites and music’ do not talk,’ unless the learner cannot ‘realize’ its justice. Then, Sorai said when scholars cannot realize even if they think, they cannot help but learning broadly other rites, and by repeating studying after studying broadly come naturally to understand the entire connections of meaning of the whole. Also, while by language one can realize only a part, rites are compact with a multitude of justices. Therefore, no matter what adroit words are employed, they cannot exhaust the whole. For this reason Sorai said that therein lies that excellence of rites that ‘learn it with silence.’

Opposed to this, according to Sorai, both Song scholarship and the contemporary Ito Jinsai’s Confucian scholarship fashionable at that time tended to expound justice apart from rites. For instance, Jinsai treated the *Analects* more important than the *Six Classics*, and maintained that if one only mastered the *Analects*, the *Six Classics* would become lucid without learning. However, according to Sorai, the *Six Classics* are things while the *Analects* are justice. Therefore, if the *Analects* are expounded without relating them to the *Six Classics*,
the *Analects* become only empty words. Sorai criticized Jinsai, saying that his method was like expounding the principles of swordsmanship without putting them into practice, and that, the way of the sages and Confucius centered on matter could not be comprehended. In this manner Sorai believed that rites had excellent educational effects by internalizing social norms (justice) in people.

In the foregoing I have reviewed Sorai’s treatise on rites by focusing on several points. When we nowadays study about the significance of rites, we must think about several problems such as who established the rites (sages), how they were established (via investigation of principles and exploitation of nature and historical conditions), how their adaptability was proven (by the length of continuity of a dynasty), what we target (stabilizing people and creating benevolent administration), wherein lie the social effects (checking luxury and educating social norms), and how to combine rites with other social ordering (by criminal law and other physical enforcement). (trans. by Dr. Kim Yongmok)