The Authority of the Classics: A Comparative Analysis of the Hermeneutics of Ouyang Xiu and Ogyū Sorai

Douglas SKONICKI
National Tsinghua University, Taiwan

ABSTRACT

In this article, I analyze how the Song dynasty thinker Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072) and the Tokugawa intellectual Ogyū Sorai (1666-1728) employed a similar hermeneutics to repudiate the cosmological theories embraced by their contemporaries. Both men argued that the conceptions of the cosmos held by their peers were based on misinterpretations of the Confucian classics. They moreover asserted that the classics revealed the parameters of knowledge established by the ancient sages, which served to delimit the proper bounds of intellectual speculation. They contended that the cosmological theories propounded by their peers overstepped these bounds and that such theories were therefore unsubstantiated. On the basis of the above two claims, Ouyang and Sorai sought to replace the cosmological theories held by the majority of their contemporaries with what they asserted was the correct view of the relationship between the cosmos and humanity found in the classics.

Keywords: Ouyang Xiu, Ogyū Sorai, classical hermeneutics, cosmology

Introduction

In this article, I examine the intellectual positions of two important Confucian theorists from Song dynasty China and Tokugawa Japan–Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072) and Ogyū Sorai (1666-1728). Ouyang and Sorai are best known for their efforts to reform the conception of Confucianism commonly accepted among their peers. Despite important differences in the forms of Confucianism that prevailed in Northern Song China and Tokugawa Japan, Ouyang and Sorai adopted a similar polemical strategy to convince their contemporaries that predominant understandings of Confucianism were erroneous. They argued that their contemporaries’ incorrect views were premised in a misreading of the Confucian classics, and they posited a new hermeneutics to expose these misreadings and shed light on the true meaning inherent in the texts.

The philosophical arguments of both Ouyang and Sorai were grounded in the claim that the classics represented the sole tool available to current generations for understanding the way of the ancient sages. They maintained that the teachings, policies and practices that constituted the content of the way were the product of human artifice; that is, they were created by the sages in response to the material conditions and emotional needs of the people. In addition, both Ouyang and Sorai asserted that this way was recorded faithfully in the Confucian classics, and that it could be readily understood through careful reading based in correct hermeneutics. Later Confucian
thinkers, however, failed to recognize this fact, and instead posited foundations and guidelines outside of the classics in their quest to make sense of the way found within the texts.

Many of their contemporaries located such foundations and guidelines in the cosmos, and contended that the key to comprehending the way lay in grasping the cosmological patterns and principles which underlay it. Ouyang and Sorai disagreed with this contention, and devoted substantial intellectual effort to repudiating the main cosmological theories that advanced it during their lifetimes — correlative cosmology in the case of the early Song and Neo-Confucianism in the case of Tokugawa Japan. While their critiques were certainly not limited to cosmological doctrines, the refutation of such doctrines represented an important component in their overall project to reform the manner in which their peers conceived of Confucian theory and practice.

The cosmological arguments advanced by Ouyang and Sorai shared a common logic and structure, which were derived from a similar hermeneutic methodology. First, both men asserted that the conceptions of the cosmos held by their peers were based on misinterpretations of the Confucian classics. These misinterpretations originated in the twofold belief that the sages relied on standards inherent in the cosmos in their creation of the way, and that it was possible for individuals in the present to effectively grasp such standards. Both men attributed the widespread presence of this belief to erroneous readings contained in the commentarial tradition. Second, they maintained that a further cause of their contemporaries' mistaken views was the presumption that it was possible to supersede the positions of the sages recorded in the classics. Both Ouyang and Sorai asserted that the classics adumbrated the sages' conception of what could be known, which naturally served to delimit the proper bounds of intellectual speculation. They contended, respectively, that the theories propounded within correlative cosmology and Neo-Confucianism overstepped these bounds and, for this reason, such theories amounted to nothing more than groundless, unsubstantiated conjecture. Third, on the basis of the above two claims, Ouyang and Sorai sought to persuade their contemporaries to adopt what they asserted was the correct view of the relationship between the cosmos and humanity found in the classics.

Although they employed a similar logical structure in their arguments, there are key differences in the intellectual positions advanced by the two men, and I do not want to suggest that Sorai's conception of the cosmos was indebted to, or derivative of, that of Ouyang Xiu. Indeed, passages from Sorai's writings suggest that he did not hold Ouyang in particularly high esteem, and that he was more impressed by the writings of Li Panlong (1514-1570) and Wang Shizhen (1526-1590). Recognizing this fact, as well as the substantial differences in the intellectual milieus of Northern Song China and Tokugawa Japan, the primary objective of the present analysis is not to trace the

---

1 Sorai discusses the problems with Ouyang's literary style as well as the insight he received from reading the works of Li Panlong and Wang Shizhen in several of his letters. Concerning the influence that Li and Wang exerted on Sorai's thought, Maruyama Masao has noted: "he received little more than hints from them. The philological examination of the Six Classics was his own idea" (Maruyama Masao, 76). Similarly, Samuel Hideo Yamashita has observed that Wang and Li's main contribution to Sorai's intellectual development concerned the realization of the vast difference between ancient and contemporary language. See Samuel Hideo Yamashita, 143-46.
presence of intellectual influence between Ouyang and Sorai, but rather to examine the strategies these two thinkers employed in their confrontation of a similar problem; namely, how to refute intellectual positions that were based in standards found outside the classics, and establish the classics as the sole foundation of Confucian political, ethical and cosmological theory.

This common problematic provides a fruitful ground for comparative analysis as well as a window for contemplating the role the classics played in the formulation of intellectual arguments within the East Asian Confucian tradition. Studies of Confucianism in East Asia have adopted a variety of different approaches in order to trace the tradition's diffusion and development across space and time. They have looked at how particular schools of Confucian thought developed in different parts of Asia; how thinkers from different Asian countries interpreted the Confucian classical corpus; how they defined important intellectual concepts; and how their different interpretive positions nonetheless reveal the presence of a common intellectual tradition, and even a shared way of thinking.²

In this study, I build upon this substantial body of work by exploring how Ouyang and Sorai confronted two fundamental tensions present in Confucian doctrine: that concerning the relationship between the Confucian classics and the way, and that between the cosmos and human affairs. Despite the very different cultural, historical and intellectual circumstances within which they formulated their positions, both men grappled with these tensions and arrived at a similar realization about the nature of the way.³ They moreover sought to demonstrate the validity of their views by appealing to a hermeneutics that privileged the authority of classical texts and restricted the search for truth to the careful study of their content.

My analysis of their positions is divided into two main parts. In Part One, I examine Ouyang Xiu’s cosmological arguments in relation to the threefold structure identified above. In Part Two, while taking care to indicate important differences in his views, I describe how Ogyū Sorai employed this same logical structure in his critique of Neo-Confucian theory. In the conclusion to the paper, I briefly discuss the implications of the structural parallels between their arguments for our understanding of Confucianism in East Asia.

Part One—Ouyang Xiu

Ouyang Xiu was without question one of the most important Chinese political, intellectual and literary figures of the eleventh century. He played an instrumental role

² See, for example, Wm. Theodore de Bary and JaHyun Kim Haboush, eds., The Rise of Neo-Confucianism in Korea; Peter Nosco, ed., Conucianism in Tokugawa Culture; Huang Chun-chih, Dongyu nuxue de xin shiye; Benjamin A. Elman, John B. Duncan, and Herman Ooms, eds., Rethinking Confucianism: Past and Present in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam; Zhang Baosan and Xu Xingqing, eds., Dechuan shidai Riben nuxue lunji; and Zhang Kunfang, Dechuan Riben zhong zhi xiao gainan de xingying yu jacuan yi hingmei yu yangmingxue wei zhongxuan.

³ On the importance of such tensions for understanding the development of Confucian thought, see Benjamin Schwartz, “Some Polarities in Confucian Thought.” I think that doctrinal tensions provide a fruitful, if hitherto relatively unexplored, basis for the comparative analysis of Confucianism in different Asian cultures.
in the development of the constellation of new ideas concerning literary composition, the creation of political order, and classical exegesis that began to emerge during the Northern Song. Ouyang was a leading proponent of Ancient-style Learning (guwen yundong), the intellectual position founded by Han Yu (768-824) during the Tang dynasty (618-907). Ouyang carried forward many of Han Yu's critiques of the Confucian tradition as it had developed from the Han through the Tang, and, like Han Yu, he sought to recover the type of government and society established by the sages in antiquity. He argued that the key to reestablishing the political and social order of antiquity lay in the appropriate application of the sages' methods, their way (dao), to present circumstances.4

Following Han's lead, Ouyang contended that the way of antiquity was created by the sages, and not based on external guidelines of any sort.5 In important essays such as “On Fundamentals” (Benlun) and his “Treatise on Ritual” (Liyue zhi) from the New Tang History (Xin Tangshu), Ouyang described the sages' creation of the way as a response to the material conditions and emotional requirements of the populace. It was not premised in the patterns of the cosmos or any other type of previously existent external standard. During the early eleventh century, this position conflicted with the Confucian mainstream, which held that the sages based their creation of the way in part on the natural patterns of the cosmos.6 The claim that the way was ultimately grounded in the cosmos served as a founding assumption of traditional correlative cosmology, the cosmological theory that Ouyang devoted a substantial amount of effort to critiquing in his writings.

The term correlative cosmology refers to a number of related theories that emerged between the Warring States period and early Han, which sought to explain the relations between the different entities and forces that comprised the universe by constructing categorical frameworks tied together through correlations. The underlying assumption that informed the relationships posited in correlative cosmology was that the human and natural worlds existed in a state of natural harmony, and that any type of disturbance in this harmony was inevitably caused, or stimulated, by human conduct. The correlative frameworks posited in these doctrines made it possible to determine what type of action caused the disturbance in question and further provided a set of behavioral prescriptions designed to restore cosmological order.

Although a handful of thinkers in the Han and Tang sought to refute its doctrines and deny its relevance to political affairs, correlative cosmology continued to serve as the predominant view of the cosmos espoused by the Confucian political elite

4 For a discussion of the larger historical context informing the development of Ancient-style Learning in the Tang and Song dynasties, as well as a detailed analysis of Ancient-style Learning intellectual positions, see Peter Bol, This Culture of Ours, chs. 4-6.
5 This is particularly evident in the first essay in his three-part “On Fundamentals,” where Ouyang describes the dao of former kings as consisting of the political policies and ethical guidelines they created to care for the populace. See Ouyang Xiu xuanji, ch. 60, 860.
6 For example, the early Tang Correct Meaning commentaries on the Book of Change (Zhouyi zhengyi) and the Record of Rites (Liji zhengyi) asserted that moral teachings and ritual had a cosmological foundation.
well into the Song dynasty. As part of his larger agenda to convince the state to implement an activist form of governance, similar to that employed by the ancient sages, Ouyang sought to disabuse his peers of the belief that political affairs should be modeled on, and adjusted in response to, cosmological conditions.

As noted above, Ouyang grounded his critique of correlative cosmology in his classical hermeneutics, as well as his conception of the limits of human knowledge. Ouyang’s hermeneutics was premised on the claim that Confucius recorded the way of the ancient sages in the classics, and that Confucius’ intentions in compiling and editing the classics were discernible. Since Confucius’ intent could be understood through careful reading and analysis, Ouyang maintained that we should base our interpretation of the classics on what Confucius intended to convey through them.

In addition to containing the intentions of the sages, Ouyang contended that the classics delimited the proper boundaries of knowledge and theoretical speculation. In his “Preface to the Diagram on the Lineages of Emperors and Kings” (Diwang shici tuxu), he argued that Confucius compiled the classics in order to halt the spread of heterodox teachings that had started to arise after the decline of the Zhou. He concluded the preface with the following passage, which discussed the relationship between the content of the classics and the proper bounds of knowledge:

```
Alas! The hundred kings adopted the way of Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, Wen and Wu as a model. Their abundant virtue and great achievements were manifest in their practice of affairs. Moreover, everything that later generations [could] want to know [of these affairs] has already been completely discussed and recorded by Confucius. Later generations did not need to know of distant affairs that were difficult to understand, and since not knowing [about them] did not adversely affect one being a gentleman, Confucius did not speak of them. Now the reason why Confucius was a sage, [was because] his wisdom [enabled him] to know what to adopt and discard, just as in this instance.
```

Ouyang did not go so far as to contend that the contents of the classics delimited the boundaries of what could be known, but he frequently invoked Confucius’ decisions on what to include and exclude from the classics as demarcating the areas of knowledge that should be pursued. His basic argument was that if Confucius did not

---

7 See Kojima Tsuyoshi, “Sodai tenkenron no seiji rinen”; and my “Employing the Right Kind of Men: The Use of Cosmological Argumentation in the Qingli Reforms.”
8 My understanding of Ouyang’s classical hermeneutics has benefited from the analyses found in the following works: James T.C. Liu, Ouyang Hsiu: An Eleventh Century Neo-Confucianist; Steven Van Zoeren, Poetry and Personality: Reading, Exegesis and Hermeneutics in Traditional China; Peter Bol, “The Sung Context: From Ouyang Hsiu to Chu Hsi;” and Yang Xinjun, Songdai yijing yanjiu.
9 My analysis is based in part on the third chapter of my Ph.D. dissertation, “Cosmos, State and Society: Song Dynasty Arguments Concerning the Creation of Political Order.”
10 Ouyang’s argument that authorial intentions remain preserved in the written word can be found in his “Discourse on the Appended Statements” (Xici shuo). His argument against using theories not found in the classics to interpret their content can be found in his “First Letter in Reply to Xu Wudang” (Da Xu Wudang diyi shu).
11 Ouyang Xiu xuanji, ch. 41, 592.
12 In making this argument, Ouyang sought to dissuade his contemporaries from speculating on
comment on a particular topic or subject of study, then it was either something that was beyond our capacity to know or something unworthy of intellectual pursuit. Ouyang’s circumscription of the proper bounds for intellectual inquiry was motivated by practical concerns involving the tendency for unbounded speculation to lead people away from the correct way.

Ouyang’s views on the limits of knowledge can be found in his “Disputing Strange Bamboo” (Guaizhu bian), which contemplated the problem of epistemological boundaries by asking whether bamboo plants possess knowledge of their surroundings. After addressing this question from several different angles, he arrived at the following conclusion:

If we speak of it from this perspective, we can neither say that bamboo possesses the faculty of knowing nor say that it is without the faculty of knowing. Thus all we can say is that we do not know whether it has the faculty of knowing or is without such faculty. The myriad things are born in the midst of heaven and earth and the principle [that animates them] does not admit of simple generalization. Can we say that only those with minds have the faculty of knowing? [But] then worms would be [classified as] lacking minds. Can we say that all things that move have the faculty of knowing? But [then] water is also a moving thing. When people and beasts are born they have the faculty of knowing; when they die they lose this faculty. [But then] milfoil and turtle carapaces lack the faculty of knowing when they are born and only gain it after they die. These are all futile intellectual exercises. Thus the sages mastered what could be known and put aside what could not be known. This is called the way of great centrality.13

While conceding that it was possible to speculate on all manner of things, Ouyang contended that such speculation tended to become absurd when pushed to its limits and thus we should restrict our intellectual efforts to what is possible to know. The sages have already done this, ordering what could be known and putting aside what could not, so we simply need to follow their example and focus our efforts on practicing the way.14

Ouyang thus rejected heterodox theories on the grounds that they strayed from Confucius’ teachings as found in the classics and moreover exceeded the proper limits of intellectual speculation. However, correlative doctrines had numerous precedents in the classical tradition. Given Ouyang’s deep respect for the authority of the classics, how did he explain the presence of such heretical views in these texts? Ouyang addressed this problem in an examination question for the jinshi degree:

Question: It is recorded in earlier texts that Confucius did not speak of the strange because [the strange] was of no help in practical matters and deluded men. However, the Book of

the nature of high antiquity and the cosmos. More recent historical studies were certainly permissible in his view, as evidenced by the numerous historical works he composed in his lifetime.


14 Ouyang addressed the negative consequences of transgressing the limits of speculation established by the sages in his “Yu zhang xucai Fei dier shu” (Second Letter to Student Zhang Fei).
Documents states that a phoenix came to Shun;15 the Book of Odes records that a black bird gave birth to the Shang;16 the Book of Change claims that the Yellow and Luo Rivers produced diagrams and books;17 and the Book of Rites states that the turtle and dragon wandered in the palace pool.18 How much more lamentable is it that the six classics are the model for ten thousand generations and yet they are also the source from which the acceptance of heterodox doctrines began. From the Qin and Han to the present, there has been no absurdity to which the writings of the various Confucians did not extend. If we trace them back to their source, then did this develop gradually? Now the sage would not write about [such things] if they did not exist. Even if they really existed, if writing about them brought no benefit and caused harm, it would be permissible for him not to record them. So did [the sage] have a purpose (literally, an intent) in writing about them, or were they not in fact recorded by the sage?19

Despite Confucius' contention that he did not speak of the strange, the classics were filled with passages that, on the surface at least, seemed to contradict this. Since his classical hermeneutics rested on the twin principles that Confucius had a purpose in editing the classics and that he would not include anything that would lead readers astray, Ouyang was left with two possible means of explaining the existence of such passages — either Confucius had a purpose in writing them or they were not in fact written by the sage.

Ouyang invoked both of these explanations to combat what he regarded as the misuse of the classics to justify correlative doctrine.20 In particular, he emphasized that, contrary to the views of Han era Confucian theorists, Confucius' intent in recording anomalies in the classics was simply to encourage vigilance in personal and political affairs.

The Analects states: “When there was a sudden clap of thunder or a violent wind, [the master] invariably assumed a solemn attitude.”21 This just means that when the gentleman stands in awe of heaven, and when he sees things acting contrary to their normal principles, he assumes a solemn attitude. When [things] lose their original nature, he ponders that there may be a reason for it and becomes awestruck and vigilant. He does not dare to ignore even minor [anomalies]. As regards the scholars of disasters and anomalies, they are not like this. They all, without exception, pinpoint the affairs to which [the disasters] were a response. When they find cases that are difficult to match, they recklessly cite obscure [passages] to make them fit their doctrines. Thus, from the Han on, the disciples of the Confucians Dong Zhongshu, Liu Xiang and his son Liu Xin misinterpreted the sage's original intent in their studies of the Spring and Autumn Annals and the “Great Plan.” It is

15 This is stated in the Yiji chapter of the Book of Documents.
16 This is from the Xuanxiao ode in the Book of Odes.
17 This claim is made in the “Appended Statements” chapter of the Book of Change.
18 This is from the Liyun chapter of the Book of Rites.
19 Ouyang Xiu quanji, ch. 48, 680.
20 Ouyang tended to utilize the former argument more often than the latter. For examples of both arguments, see Shu benyi, ch. 12. Siku quanshu ed., vol. 70, 272 and Xin wudai shi, ch. 63, 795.
truly pathetic to see the inconsistencies and mutual contradictions this leads to between father and son.22

The above passage reveals that Ouyang did not categorically deny the claim that disasters were related to human affairs. In several writings, he asserted that the connection between disasters and the government was voucheded by Confucius’ decision to record disasters in the classics, and he advanced a highly nuanced two-part argument rooted in both his classical hermeneutics and his theory of knowledge to demonstrate that the proper way to respond to disasters was to accord with Confucius’ intent and vigilantly assess political circumstances.

In the first argument, which he adumbrated in “The Treatise on Astronomy” in the New History of the Five Dynasties, Ouyang maintained that Confucius did not remove references to heaven from the classics because doing so would have had a negative effect on human affairs.23 He asserted that Confucius decided that acknowledging the existence of heaven, but leaving the mechanisms according to which it operated left unstated, was the best means of ensuring that the ruler and the officials manning the bureaucracy would remain vigilant.

Yet if heaven was beyond our capacity to know and if Confucius simply invoked heaven as a rhetorical tool to encourage the ruler to rectify affairs, what reason was there for sovereigns to heed this advice? Establishing the epistemological foundations to address this question constituted Ouyang’s second argument, which he based on the tuan statement of the qian hexagram from the Book of Change:

Yet is heaven really involved with man or not? I say that I do not know heaven, but it is possible to investigate it through the words of the sage. The Book of Change states: “The way of heaven decreases the replete and increases the meager; the dao of earth changes the replete and promotes the meager; ghosts and spirits harm the replete and bless the meager; the way of man hates the replete and is fond of the meager.” This is the sage’s ultimate theory on the relationship between heaven and man, it is his most detailed and clear [statement on this matter]. With regard to heaven, earth, ghosts and spirits, his words express that we cannot know [about them]. The only thing that is possible to know is man…

As for man, we can know him and thus he directly spoke of his circumstances by stating fondness and hate. This knowing and not knowing are different terms; if we examine and combine them, [their situation] is no different from that of man. Is [heaven] really involved with man or not? This is that which is not known. Because it is something that cannot be known, we remain ever respectful and keep our distance. Because it is no different from man, we rectify our human affairs and that is all. Human affairs are heaven’s intent. The Book of Documents states: “Heaven sees what my people see; heaven hears what

22 Xin Tangshu, ch. 34, 872. Ouyang furthermore maintained that Han correlative theory was fallacious because the causes of disasters were beyond man’s ability to know. Earlier in the “Treatise,” he wrote: “Yet at times their inferences cannot match [the cause], is this not because of the vastness of heaven and earth, there are definitely things that cannot be known?” (Ibid).

23 Xin wudai shi, ch. 59, 705. See also Peter Bol, “The Sung Context: From Ouyang Hsiu to Chu Hsi,” and Teraji Jun, “O-yo Shn ni okoru tenjin sokansetsu e no kaigi.”
my people hear.” There has never been an instance where the people were content below and heaven’s intent was angry above; when human principle was contravened below and heaven’s way proceeded smoothly above.24

As the above passage demonstrates, Ouyang interpreted the tuan statement as establishing a series of parallels between heaven, earth, ghosts and spirits and man. These parallels were not premised on Confucius’ understanding of the minds, or motives, of heaven, earth, ghosts and spirits, but rather on his observation of their phenomenal traces. He was able to deduce the basic principles according to which these entities behaved by observing their traces in things and then comparing them to the basic principles of human behavior which could in fact be known.25 This comparison led to the realization that the principles according to which heaven, earth, ghosts and spirits acted were the same as those that underlay human behavior. Ouyang thus concluded that “human affairs are heaven’s intent.”

Ouyang’s position regarding the relationship between heaven and man was thus premised on a distinction between what could and could not be known. This distinction in turn could be understood through a correct reading of the sages’ intentions in classical passages that concerned the relationship between the cosmos and human affairs. Since human beings could not know heaven’s mind directly, Ouyang argued that we must respond to anomalies with fear and vigilance. On the other hand, since they could know that the principles governing human affairs were parallel to those governing heaven, earth, ghosts and spirits, Ouyang contended that we could engender cosmological order by rectifying human affairs. These parallels were identified by Confucius and recorded in the Book of Change in order to serve as guides for later generations. Ouyang interpreted the intent of Confucius’ statement to be that, since heaven, earth, ghosts and spirits, and man act in a parallel fashion, we need not concern ourselves over questions of stimulus and response in the manner of correlative theoreticians. Such questions were irrelevant to the creation of order, which theoretically speaking, did not depend on a determination of how heaven was involved in human affairs. This position enabled Ouyang to argue that anomalies were occasions for the ruler to focus on the implementation of effective policies. Once this was done, preferably through the adoption of Ouyang’s own proposals, the cosmos would naturally revert to a state of harmony.

24 Xin wudai shi, ch. 59, 705-6.
25 Ouyang makes this point more clearly in a discussion of the qian hexagram in his Yi tongzi wen: “The sage stressed the importance of human affairs. He seldom spoke of the relationship between heaven and man. It is only in the tuan statement of the qian hexagram that his doctrine is briefly discussed. The sage was a man and [so] he only knew men. Heaven, earth, ghosts and spirits could not be known, thus he deduced their traces. Men could be known and so he directly spoke of their circumstances. By means of human circumstances, he deduced the traces of heaven, earth, ghosts and spirits and [found that] they were not different. Thus cultivate human affairs and that is all. If human affairs are cultivated then [man] will attain harmony with heaven, earth, ghosts and spirits” (Ouyang Xiu quanj, ch. 76, 1109).
Part Two—Ogyū Sorai

Ogyū Sorai lived during a period of Japanese history when the orthodox Neo-Confucian tradition began to be reassessed by Confucian thinkers interested in intellectual and political reform. Neo-Confucianism had risen to predominance in China during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and it subsequently spread throughout a large part of East Asia. Early Tokugawa Confucian thought was dominated by the Cheng-Zhu version of Neo-Confucianism as interpreted by the influential scholars Fujiwara Seika (1561-1619), Hayashi Razan (1583-1657), and Yamazaki Ansai (1619-1682). By the late seventeenth century, however, figures such as Yamaga Sokō (1622-1685) and Itō Jinsai (1627-1705) started to express dissatisfaction with this version of Cheng-Zhu thought, particularly with regard to its conception of the cosmos and what they took to be the impractical nature of its ethics. Although their theories differed, both Sokō and Jinsai faulted Cheng-Zhu doctrine for its overreliance on “investigating principle” and its emphasis on reverence as a purely internal disposition. On the basis of their belief that Cheng-Zhu thought had strayed from the way of the ancient sages, they called for a renewed examination of the Confucian classics, which focused on recovering the original meaning of the language found in the texts. The methodology proposed by Sokō and Jinsai prepared the ground for Ogyū Sorai’s arguments about the importance of basing interpretations of the way in the ancient language of the classics. However, despite the influence their critique of Neo-Confucian doctrine exerted on his thought, Sorai remained dissatisfied with their views and faulted Sokō and Jinsai for failing to fully extricate themselves from the Neo-Confucian theoretical paradigm.

In two important works composed towards the end of his life, the Bendō and Benmei, Sorai asserted that the Neo-Confucian paradigm was fundamentally flawed due to the fact that it went beyond the teachings contained within the classics. In these two works, he exposed the manifold ways in which the theories of both Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucians and Itō Jinsai contravened the way of the sages adumbrated within the ancient texts. The intellectual problematic that shaped Ogyū Sorai’s arguments in the Bendō and the Benmei shares many points of convergence with that informing the work of Ouyang Xiu. Like Ouyang, Sorai emphasized the public, political function of the way, and maintained that it was created by the sages on the...
basis of the people’s circumstances in order to provide for their welfare. Since the way was fundamentally a human creation, and not derivative of any external or internal foundation in the cosmos or the self, its apprehension depended on adopting a proper hermeneutic approach to the classics. Sorai critiqued current methods of interpreting the classics, as well as other ancient texts, and he introduced a new method of reading that enabled Japanese scholars to grasp the purport of classical writings without relying on commentaries. In connection with this effort, he sought to reorient Japanese intellectuals away from the hermeneutics advocated by Neo-Confucian thinkers, which focused on the attainment of external truths such as principle and the nature.

In opposition to the Neo-Confucian methodology, Ogyū argued for a more linguistically rigorous exegetical method. As the name of his learning, “the study of old phrases and syntax” (kobunjigaku), suggests, Sorai stressed that the key to comprehending the way lay in determining the correct meaning of the language found in the classics. Sorai made this point clearly in his Bendō:

Employing an argument similar to that used by Ouyang Xiu in his denunciation of certain aspects of the commentarial tradition, Sorai maintained that the Neo-Confucian commentators his contemporaries relied upon to grasp the meaning of the classics had in fact misunderstood their content. He differed from Ouyang, who identified the problem as one of missing the purport of the sage’s intentions in recording certain events, by insisting that the problem actually had deeper origins; namely, the inability

(Nihon shisōtaihe, 36, 499).

Both Ouyang and Sorai emphasized that the sages’ based the way on their appraisal of human emotions and circumstances. For discussions of their respective positions on this matter, see Samuel Hideo Yamashita, 160-64; and Peter Bol, “The Sung Context,” 32-33.

As he wrote in the Bendō, this way was the product of the sages’ creative powers: “The way of the former kings was created by the ancient kings; it is not the natural way of heaven and earth” (Nihon jurin sho, 4, Bendō, 3).

For a comprehensive analysis of Ogyū Sorai’s view of language and his methodology for reading Chinese texts, see Emanuel Pastreich, “Grappling with Chinese Writing as a Material Language: Ogyū Sorai’s Yakubunsentei.” Sorai’s assertion that commentaries were unnecessary can be found in the second of his Instructions for Students (Gakusoku). See Richard H. Minear, 16.

See Pastreich, 133.

Sorai contended that the Neo-Confucian tendency to “separate name from reality” represented the final stage in a long process of linguistic decline that disjoined names from their referents. He described this process in the opening lines of his *Benmei*:

> When Confucius passed away, the Hundred Schools flourished, and each established names according to their own viewpoints. Things then began to become confused… Arriving at the Han dynasty, individuals [specialized in] different classics and [each] classic had different traditions of learning. Although their interpretations varied, the main point was that they were all derived from the teachings of Confucius’ disciples, so that even though there was confusion, what was lost in one school was preserved in another. By consulting their different views, it was possible to avoid confusion between names and things. This was because the old [teachings] were still being transmitted. Ma Rong and Zheng Xuan understood [the positions of] the various schools, and they verified some views, and discarded others. Thereupon, specialized traditions of learning were eliminated, and the correlation between names and things became confused and could no longer be known, for many things were no longer transmitted. This was truly regrettable. From that time forward, as generations changed so too did language… In the Song, Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi had a different way of studying past and present…they then had the intent to grasp [the sages’ way] through principle, and they maintained that this constituted the way of the sages. They really did not understand that the language of the present is not the language of antiquity, and that the literature of the present is not the same as the literature of antiquity.  

As the above passage indicates, Sorai viewed the Neo-Confucian use of principle to determine the purport of the classics as nothing more than an interpretive crutch designed to paper over their linguistic ignorance. In order to recover the way of the sages, scholars needed to reject such overly facile hermeneutic techniques and focus on the relationship between names and things contained in the classics.  

Sorai’s hermeneutics thus differed from that espoused by Ouyang Xiu in two important respects. First, he focused on recovering the precise referents to the terms contained within the classics, not simply the intentions of the sages. Second, he praised, rather than condemned, the commentaries of early Han scholars, noting that due to their close temporal proximity to Confucius, they managed to retain the original meanings of many important concepts found in the classics. In contrast, Ouyang’s hermeneutics stressed the recovery of the intentions of the sages in order to reveal the purport of recorded passages, and he frequently critiqued Han interpreters for failing to decipher these intentions accurately.

---

36 *Nihon shisō takeri*, 36, *Benmei*, 209. My translations of the *Benmei* have consulted those found in Tetsuo Najita, *Tokugawa Political Writings*.


38 A corollary of this view was Sorai’s rejection of the claim, advanced by Ouyang as well as Neo-Confucian exegetes, that one of the keys to discerning the intentions of the sages lay in determining the praise or blame exhibited in specific passages.
However, in spite of this different methodology, Sorai, like Ouyang, frequently invoked authorial intent to support his reading of specific passages. For example, in the following passage, Sorai argued for an absolute distinction between the sages and ordinary men on the basis of the intent of Zisi, the purported author of the *Doctrine of the Mean*, and Mencius:

As for the sages’ virtues of brilliance and wisdom, they were received from heaven; how could they possibly be achieved through study? Their virtue was mysterious and beyond measurement; how could it possibly be obtained and investigated? Thus, those in antiquity who became sages through study were only Tang, Wu and Confucius. For this reason, those in antiquity skilled at studying the sages definitely followed the sages’ teachings, and via [the practice of] the rites and music completed their virtue. This was the only thing that Zisi said. Although Mencius did not speak of the Rites and Music, when he claimed that: “Humans can become like Yao and Shun,” he simply meant that people should dress, speak and act like Yao, which does not necessarily entail seeking to become a sage. Later Confucians failed to investigate the intent behind the words of these two scholars, and thus recklessly [interpreted] their intent as seeking to become a sage.

Sorai continued the passage by critiquing Song Neo-Confucians for asserting that there was a cosmological foundation for sagehood, which endowed all men with the capacity to become sages. He argued that such claims overstepped the bounds of what could be known: “In these clever mental exertions [Song Confucians] claimed to hold the wisdom of the sages, and took pleasure in measuring what could not be measured, thereby forcing onto people what could not be studied.”

As the above passage makes clear, Sorai argued for a hard and fast distinction between sages and ordinary men. He criticized Song Neo-Confucians for arrogating the capacity to become sages to all men and further maintained that the Neo-Confucians’ belief that principle was inherently knowable imparted a false sense of confidence regarding the capacity of human beings to understand the world. In other words, in much the same way that the correlative frameworks constructed by correlative theorists provided a false sense of confidence in deducing the causes of different disasters and anomalies, the Neo-Confucian theory of principle led them to speculate on things that were beyond the capacity of ordinary individuals to know.

Like Ouyang Xiu, Sorai used claims about the limits of knowledge to critique contemporary views of the cosmos. In particular, he argued that the confidence Neo-Confucian thinkers expressed in their ability to understand principle overstepped the boundaries established by the sages regarding what could be known.

---

39 The majority of “names” that Sorai singled out for explanation in the *Benmei* were abstract terms that did not have precise referents — heaven, the way, virtue, benevolence, etc. Having rejected the Neo-Confucian claim to an extra-textual benchmark against which to determine the meanings of terms such as these, he frequently resorted to the same technique employed by Ouyang.


42 See Tetsuo Najita, *Tokugawa Political Writings*, 132.
The way of the ancient kings was based exclusively on a reverence for Heaven, ghosts and spirits. This was for no reason other than the fact that they gave primacy to benevolence. However, because Confucian scholars of later ages honored knowledge and endeavored to investigate the principle of things, the way of the ancient kings and Confucius became damaged. The defect inherent in investigating “principle” was that heaven, ghosts and spirits were no longer viewed with awe, and the individual thereupon assumed a presumptuous position between heaven and earth. This flaw is universal among Confucian thinkers of later ages; how is it not [akin to the Buddhist saying], “Above and below heaven I alone exist.” Moreover, given the boundless expanse of the cosmos, what exactly does exhausting principle entail? How can principle be completely exhausted? As for those who claim to have complete comprehension, this is just simply delusion. Thus, in their theorizing, they all ostensibly revere the ancient kings and Confucius, while in private they have already contravened them. They claim to have discovered things unnoticed by the ancient kings, and have no self-awareness of the fact that they seek to surpass the ancient kings and Confucius. Now, the teachings of the sages are perfect; how could it be possible to surpass them? The ancient sages refrained from discussing subjects that could not possibly be explained. Whenever there were matters that the sages did not comment on, it was simply because it was appropriate not to comment on them. If there were something that required commentary, then the former kings and Confucius would already have commented on it. How could they have left things undiscovered and wait for later individuals [to describe] them? [Such views] are simply [the result of] not having given much thought to these matters.

Sorai makes two claims in the above passage that deserve comment. First, he indicates that the belief that principle could be exhausted led Neo-Confucians to view heaven as an object of knowledge, and thereby discard the sense of awe with which it was traditionally perceived. Second, he posits a twofold theory of knowledge that was identical to that advanced by Ouyang Xiu: first, the sages did not discourse on things that could not be explained, thereby establishing the proper boundaries of intellectual speculation; and second, the sages’ teachings are completely sufficient and contained in their entirety in the classics. Employing this argument, both Ouyang and Sorai critiqued their contemporaries for positing standards not found in the classics to understand the way of antiquity. One of the primary targets in the polemics of both men, which they traced back to this type of baseless intellectual speculation, was the claim that there existed patterns or principles in the cosmos that could guide human affairs.

As with Ouyang Xiu, in attempting to overturn the erroneous conceptions of
the cosmos held by his peers, Sorai had to demonstrate that they had misinterpreted the classical passages upon which their claims were based. In so doing, he adopted a strategy similar to that employed by Ouyang — he sought to show how his opponents had missed the intent of such passages, the result being that their positions were ultimately based in nothing more than their subjective interpretations. In a manner reminiscent of Ouyang’s critique of the Han promoters of correlative doctrine, Sorai sought to undercut Neo-Confucian conceptions of the cosmos by exposing the erroneous descriptions of heaven found in the *Doctrine of the Mean* and the *Mencius*, which served as the basis for their positions:

The *Book of Odes* states: “How vast and continuous is heaven’s mandate.” This line originally spoke of how heaven sent down the great mandate to the Zhou. Although the mandate was profound, far-reaching and beyond perception, it continued without ceasing. Zisi employed the notion of ceaseless absolute sincerity to discourse on heaven; this was his original invention and not something found in ancient texts. He thus invoked this ode as evidence [of his view], but how could this represent the original purport of the ode? The Song Confucians did not investigate this, and accordingly took [Zisi’s interpretation] to be the foundation of heaven’s way; this is simply their own view. As for sincerity, it represents only one of heaven’s virtues; how could it exhaust heaven?45

Sorai expanded upon the above claims in a subsequent passage, which delineated the process of misinterpretation that led to the Neo-Confucian conceit that men could truly “know” heaven:

As for heaven, it is not something that can be known. Moreover, the sages were in awe of heaven and thus they only said: “[I] know heaven’s calling;” and “That which knows me is heaven.” They never said they “knew heaven,” and this was the height of reverence. Arriving at Zisi and Mencius, there started to appear the words “knowing heaven.” However, [Zisi] only said that the nature was mandated from heaven, and thus he took sincerity to be a virtue of the nature. That was it. Mencius, too, only said that heaven bestowed goodness; that was it. However, once they issued forth the words “knowing heaven,” elder scholars from later generations spoke of heaven with arrogance; how could this have been the intent of the ancient kings and Confucius when they spoke of revering heaven?...In general, cultivated men of later ages arrogantly sought to become sages; they moreover did not know ancient words and syntax and were not able to read ancient texts. They all adapted [the texts] to accord with their own personal views. Scholars must reflect on this.46

Sorai critiqued Neo-Confucian theories of the cosmos as subjective and groundless because they contravened the words of the sages, who had already determined that heaven could not in fact be known.47

45 Nihon shisōtakei, 36, Bennet, 235.
46 Nihon shisōtakei, 36, Bennet, 236.
47 It is important to note that Sorai made a distinction between heaven and the way of heaven. Like Ouyang Xiu, Sorai asserted that it was possible to deduce patterns in the operation of heaven and earth, and that these patterns represented the totality of what could be known about heaven.
The reason why the ancient sages respected and revered [heaven] without respite was because it could not be known or measured. The theories of Han Confucians regarding disasters and anomalies are probably a legacy from ancient times. However, their claims about the causes of solar eclipses and earthquakes involved using subjective knowledge to assess heaven. Song Confucians' statement that “heaven is principle” also used subjective knowledge to assess heaven.48

Since, like Ouyang Xiu, Sorai asserted that heaven was beyond our ability to know, the proper attitude to adopt towards heaven was one of reverence. Sorai interpreted heaven against the backdrop of early Chinese religious and political practice, maintaining that the ancients' reverence for heaven developed from the performance of ancestral sacrifices.49 The Song Neo-Confucians, however, failed to grasp that the object of the sages' reverence – heaven – was outside the self, leading to their mistaken view that reverence was a purely internal disposition.50 Sorai advanced a similar argument in connection with the origins of ritual. He asserted that, contrary to the claims of Zhu Xi, the rituals of antiquity were neither modeled on natural principles inherent in the cosmos, nor derived from the good human nature. Rather, statements from the classics that linked heaven with the rites referred to this ancient religious notion of heaven as an object of reverence.51

Through this hermeneutics designed to recover the original meaning of the classics, Sorai sought to refute the Neo-Confucian conception of the cosmos, which served as the primary ground of their philosophical system. He argued that there was no evidence in the classics to support their identification of heaven's moral authority with universal principle and the human nature. He asserted, on the contrary, that heaven was an unknowable entity external to the self, which the sages treated with the utmost respect and reverence. An important consequence of his position was that there was no foundation either within the self or the cosmos upon which to base good government and moral conduct. Rather, as with Ouyang Xiu, Sorai maintained that the only way to recover the way of the ancient sages was through the correct reading of the classics.

Conclusion

What then are the implications of the above analysis for our understanding of East Asian Confucianism? As mentioned in the introduction, although Sorai was certainly familiar with Ouyang Xiu, there is no evidence to indicate that his position was directly influenced by Ouyang's thought. Sorai's adoption of an argument that employed a logic and structure similar to that used by Ouyang cannot, in and of itself, substantiate a claim to such influence. Given this, I think that the value of comparing the polemical strategies adopted by Ouyang and Sorai lies in how it elucidates some key tensions inherent in the Confucian tradition, particularly concerning the relationship between

48 Nihon shisotaihei, 36, Benmei, 235.
49 Nihon shisotaihei, 36, Benmei, 227.
50 Nihon shisotaihei, 36, Benmei, 227.
51 Nihon shisotaihei, 36, Benmei, 220.
the classics and the way, and the relationship between the cosmos and humanity. Studying how Confucian thinkers from different eras and different countries dealt with tensions such as these can lead to a greater, and more nuanced, understanding of the issues that drove the development of Confucianism across East Asia.

With regards to Ouyang and Sorai, they addressed these tensions through the promotion of a hermeneutics which maintained that there were no guides or standards to be found outside of the classics. As noted above, this conception of the relationship between the classics and the way diverged from the mainstream Confucian exegetical traditions in both Song China and Tokugawa Japan, which assumed that the sages based their political and moral teachings on various external standards such as the patterns or principles found in the cosmos. Both Ouyang and Sorai sought to refute such claims by judging them against the content of the texts upon which they were supposedly based. Despite important differences in their exegetical methodologies, in practice the strategy adopted by both thinkers focused on demonstrating how their ideological foes had miscomprehended the purport of key passages found within the classics.

The classical hermeneutics of Ouyang and Sorai are thus linked by their adoption of a similar solution – their proposal of a rigorous textualism rooted in the assumption that the way was created by the sages – to a common problem – the rebuttal of intellectual positions based in standards extrinsic to the classics. While the intellectual milieus within which they crafted their positions differed considerably, both Ouyang and Sorai, I think, realized that within the Confucian tradition, be it that of Northern Song China or Tokugawa Japan, a strong argument could be made that the authority of the classics outweighed the authority of any type of external standard used to discern the nature of the way. Their conception of the way, in fact, which emphasized the practice of moral government through the implementation of concrete policies based on the people's condition, was tailor-made for this polemical strategy in that it did not require justification through appeals to external foundations in the cosmos or the self. Furthermore, had they sought to legitimate their visions by invoking external foundations, they would have been playing to the strengths of their opponents, whose views regarding the cosmos and the self had come to be accepted as orthodox. Given this, it seems probable that both men decided to shift the terms of the debate by asserting that the classics constituted the one and only foundation for discerning the Confucian way.
## Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bendō</td>
<td>辨道</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benlun</td>
<td>本論</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benmei</td>
<td>辨名</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benmo lun</td>
<td>本末論</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheng-Zhu</td>
<td>程朱</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheng Yi</td>
<td>程頤</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhuan Yitu xu</td>
<td>傳易圖序</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Da Xu Wudang diyi shu</td>
<td>答徐無黨第一書</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dao</td>
<td>道</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diwang shici tuxu</td>
<td>帝王世次圖序</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dong Zhongshu</td>
<td>董仲舒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fujiwara Seika</td>
<td>藤原惺窩</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gakusoku</td>
<td>學則</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guaizhu bian</td>
<td>怪竹辯</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guwen yundong</td>
<td>古文運動</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Han Yu</td>
<td>韓愈</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hayashi Razan</td>
<td>林羅山</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huangdi</td>
<td>黃帝</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Itō Jinsai</td>
<td>伊藤仁齋</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jinshi</td>
<td>進士</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kei</td>
<td>敬</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kobunjigaku</td>
<td>古文辞學</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaji hongi kaijo li</td>
<td>旧事本紀解頌</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li Panlong</td>
<td>李攀龍</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liji zhengyi</td>
<td>禮記正義</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liu Xiang</td>
<td>劉向</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liu Xin</td>
<td>劉歆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liyue zhi</td>
<td>禮樂志</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liyan</td>
<td>禮運</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lu</td>
<td>魯</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma Rong</td>
<td>馬融</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ouyang Xiu</td>
<td>欧陽脩</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ogyū Sorai</td>
<td>萩生徂徠</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qian</td>
<td>謙</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shang</td>
<td>商</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shi</td>
<td>土</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shi benyi</td>
<td>詩本義</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shijing</td>
<td>詩經</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shun</td>
<td>舜</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tang</td>
<td>湯</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tuan</td>
<td>輝</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wang Shizhen</td>
<td>王世貞</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wen</td>
<td>文</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wu</td>
<td>武</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wu you changli shuo</td>
<td>物有常理說</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wuxing zhi</td>
<td>五行志</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiang</td>
<td>象</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xici</td>
<td>蒊辭</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xici shuo</td>
<td>嗣辭說</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xin Tangshu</td>
<td>新唐書</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xin wudai shi</td>
<td>新五代史</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xuanmiao</td>
<td>玄鳥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yamaga Sokō</td>
<td>山鹿素行</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yao</td>
<td>春</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yi tongzi wen</td>
<td>易童子問</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yi ji</td>
<td>益稷</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yi jing</td>
<td>易經</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yu</td>
<td>禹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yu Zhangxiucai Fei dier shu</td>
<td>與張秀才棐第二書</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yuandao</td>
<td>原道</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zheng Xuan</td>
<td>鄭玄</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhouyi zhengyi</td>
<td>周易正義</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhu Xi</td>
<td>朱熹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zisi</td>
<td>子思</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


