Yamaga Sokō’s Seikyō yōroku:
An English Translation (Part One)

John Allen Tucker
University of North Florida

A. Introduction

Yamaga Sokō’s 山鹿素行 (1622-1685) Seikyō yōroku 聖教要録 (Essentials of the Sagely Confucian Teachings) was a significant text in Tokugawa (1603-1867) intellectual history for at least two reasons. First of all, it was the first one published by any kogaku 古学, or “School of Ancient Confucian Learning,” thinker. Second, because the Seikyō yōroku offended a powerful bakufu official, it was soon banned and Sokō was promptly exiled to Akō 赤穂 domain. Once Sokō’s Confucian ideas had been declared taboo by the bakufu, it became quite easy for later scholars to attack his teachings publicly for even the most spurious reasons. For example, after the Akō rōnin vendetta of 1703, which involved a serious breach of bakufu law, several Confucian scholars blamed the vendetta on the disruptive influence of Sokō’s philosophy. Such allegations, along with the earlier damage done to Sokō’s teachings by his exile, doomed whatever chances Sokō’s learning had of gaining official Tokugawa patronage, something that Sokō had literally dreamed of most of his adult life.¹

At the same time, however, Sokō’s thought, once disgraced in the shogun’s capital, gained popularity in the distant domains of several tozama daimyō 外様大名. The latter, known as “the outer lords” in English, were the least willing and least loyal participants in the Tokugawa political system. Ironically, by the end of the Tokugawa period Sokō’s ideas, far from giving ideological support to the bakufu, had become key philosophical forces in the somnō 尊王 thought of such shishi 志士 as Yoshida Shōin 吉田松陰, 1830-59). Also ironic is that the groundless allegations linking Sokō’s thought to the Akō rōnin vendetta, first made to incriminate Sokō’s ideas, came to be boastfully repeated by advocates of Sokō’s teachings who saw in the connection evidence of the kind of ultimate values which Sokō’s learning could inculcate. Finally ironic is that while Sokō’s ideas first sought to civilize early-seventeenth-century samurai, in pre-1945 Japan they were used to promote the militarization of a civilian population. Since the notoriety of the Seikyō yōroku helped to catalyze these twists of fate in Sokō’s life and thought, it is arguably a significant text for understanding modern Japanese history as well as that of Tokugawa Japan.

Before examining the historical circumstances surrounding the appearance of the Seikyō yōroku, a few observations regarding kogaku are in order. First, Sokō never thought of himself as a kogakusha 古学者, or “ancient learning theorist.” Nor did he see

himself as the pioneer of classical or antiquarian tendencies in Confucian philosophical semantics, tendencies that Itô Jinsai (1627-1705) and Ogü Sorai (1666-1728) subsequently advanced in works such as the *Gomô jigi* (The Meanings of Terms in the *Analects and Mencius*) and the *Benmei* (The Meanings of Ancient Philosophical Terms). Nor did most early commentators on Tokugawa Confucianism see Sokô, Jinsai, and Sorai as three of a kind. From the beginning of the twentieth century, however, Japanese and Western historians have characterized them as successive generations of a fundamentalist Confucian reaction against the Neo-Confucian ideas of Zhu Xi (1130-1200), whose Song dynasty (960-1279) philosophical works predominated in East Asia during its late-medieval and early modern eras. These historians follow Inoue Tetsujirô's *Nihon Yômei gakushû no tetsuga* (The Philosophy of the Japanese School of Wang Yangming), the *Nihon kogakuha no tetsugakushû* (The Philosophy of the Japanese School of Ancient Learning), and *Nihon Shushi gakushû no tetsugakushû* (The Philosophy of the Japanese School of Zhu Xi Neo-Confucianism) (Tokyo: Fujanbô, 1900-1903). Inoue's scheme is heuristically valuable for beginning students of Japanese history, but the category by which it links Sokô, Jinsai, and Sorai is actually anachronistic.

Despite the artificiality of kogaku, good reasons, both philosophical and textual, exist for linking Sokô, Jinsai, and Sorai. Philosophically they all announced their rejection of Song and Ming Neo-Confucianism while asserting their alleged return to a more ancient and supposedly authentic Confucian teaching. Textually, Sokô, Jinsai, and Sorai are linked by their common appropriation of a philosophical methodology, that of systematic analysis of the meanings of philosophical terms, developed in Chen Beixi's *Xingli ziyi* (The Meanings of Neo-Confucian Terms, ca. 1226). The

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2 Tawara Tsuguo 田原剔郎, *Tokugawa shisô shi kenkyû* 徳川思想史研究 (Studies in the History of Tokugawa Thought) (Tokyo: Mirai-sha, 1967), pp. 7-26. Tawara notes that the *Sentetsu sôdan gohen* 先哲叢談後編 (Collection of Biographical Notes on Wise Men of the Past, Later Edition), published in 1829, suggests that Sokô was known primarily as a martial philosopher. Though it compares Sokô's ideas to those of Jinsai and Sorai, it judges that Sokô did not completely break with Zhu Xi's learning as Jinsai and Sorai did.

3 Inoue Tetsujirô 井上哲次郎, *Nihon Yômei gakushû no tetsugakushû* 日本陽明學派的哲學 (The Philosophy of the Japanese School of Wang Yangming), *Nihon kogakuha no tetsugakushû* 日本古學派の哲學 (The Philosophy of the Japanese School of Ancient Learning), and *Nihon Shushi gakushû no tetsugakushû* 日本朱子學派的哲學 (The Philosophy of the Japanese School of Zhu Xi Neo-Confucianism) (Tokyo: Fujanbô, 1900-1903).

4 Wing-tsit Chan has translated a different edition of this text. His translation is entitled *Neo-Confucian Terms Explained* (hereafter, NCTE) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). All Tokugawa editions except the 1668 one were based on the 1553 Korean edition, which differs considerably from the text that Chan translated. The 1553 Korean edition on which most Tokugawa editions were based is found in the Harvard-Yenching Library. There is a modern reprint of the 1668 edition in vol. 21 of the *Wakoku e iin kensei kanshû* 和刻影印近代漢籍叢刊, 思想編 (Early Modern Collection of Literary Chinese Texts Printed in Japan, Works on Thought) (Kyoto: Chûbun shuppansa, 1977), Okada Takehiko 岡田武彦, general editor. The 1668 edition is entitled *Hokkai sensei jigi shôkô* 北溟先生字義詳講 (C. Beixi xiansheng zi yi xiangjia). For a detailed discussion of these textual issues, see the Appendix to my dissertation, *Ch'en Pei-hsi's Tsu-yi and Tokugawa Philosophical Lexicography* (Columbia University, 1990). There are no modern reprints of the 1632, 1659, or 1670 editions, though all can be found at Kyoto University. Miura Kunio 三浦國雄, *Shushi* 朱子 (Master
latter, commonly known as Beixi’s Ziyi, first entered Japan in the form of the 1553 Korean edition, arriving as a result of Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s Korean invasions in the 1590’s. In seventeenth-century Japan, the Ziyi was a widely studied Neo-Confucian text, it being published and republished in 1632, 1659, 1668, and 1670. Hayashi Razan (1583-1657), the Neo-Confucian scholar and intellectual-ideological vassal to the first four Tokugawa shoguns, was the main promoter of Beixi’s Ziyi in early Tokugawa Japan.

Razan’s Seiri jigi genkai (Japanese Explication of Beixi’s Ziyi), published in 1659, just six years before Sokō’s Seikyō yōroku appeared, extensively annotated Beixi’s lexicographic study of Neo-Confucian terms, making the latter’s philosophico-semantic claims more accessible. In many cases Razan included textual material showing how Song Neo-Confucians had used terms which had earlier histories in Daoist and/or Buddhist discourse. But most typically Razan defended the Neo-Confucian appropriation of those terms, insisting that the crucial question was not their remote origins but rather the meaning assigned to them. Razan had thus already explored, but decisively rejected, what became the kogaku method of critiquing Neo-Confucianism via appeal to the original meanings of philosophical terms. Unlike Razan, who allowed that words could live and grow lexicographically, kogaku scholars beginning with Sokō insisted that the only legitimate meanings words could have were those which the ancient sages had assigned to them. All other semantic accretions, especially those traceable to Buddhism and/or Daoism, required expurgation. Razan’s impact on Sokō is not a matter of speculation: Razan was Sokō’s earliest Confucian teacher, and numerous discussions of Beixi’s Ziyi surface in the Yamaga gorui 山鹿語類 (Classified Conversations of Yamaga [Sokō]). Because the latter offers a fuller version of the conceptual discussions found in the Seikyō yōroku, one can reasonably conclude that Beixi’s Ziyi was a major source of the ideas and methodology of the Seikyō yōroku.

There is also evidence establishing the impact of Beixi’s Ziyi on Itō Jinsai’s Gomō jigi. Jinsai’s diary, for example, records that between the twelfth lunar month of 1682 and the ninth month of 1683, when Jinsai was composing the first draft of his Gomō jigi, he was also lecturing his students on Beixi’s Ziyi. The Gomō jigi even alludes to the Ziyi in its title, jigi being the Japanese reading of the Chinese ziyi 字義. There are additionally several passages in the Gomō jigi which explicitly refer to Beixi’s Ziyi, and many more which allude to the Ziyi without overtly identifying the Ziyi as its source. Koyasu Nobukuni has also recently noted the indirect impact of Beixi’s Ziyi on Ogyū Sorai’s Benmei. Though Sokō, Jinsai, and Sorai were not linked in teacher-disciple relations,

Zhu (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1979), p. 218, notes that the Ziyi was “China’s first philosophical lexicon” (Chūgoku saishō no tetsugaku fiten 中国最初的哲学辞典). Presumably it has the same status in Japan.

Razan’s manuscript is in the Naikaku bunko 内閣文庫 at the Kekuritsu kōbun shikan 国立公文書館 in Tokyo. A copy of the 1659 woodblock edition is at Kyoto University.


their major texts bear a striking resemblance to one another. So similar are they that if one did not posit some other text by which their relations could be explained, one would likely assume that Jinsai and Sorai studied Sok6’s Seiky6 y6roku before formulating their own kogaku philosophies. There is no evidence supporting the latter possibility, leaving the resemblances between the three texts either (a) a mystery, (b) a coincidence, or (c) the result of their shared relationship with yet another text, possibly Beixi’s Ziyi. Given the presence of textual evidence and scholarly opinion tying the Seiky6 y6roku, the Gomdjigi, and the Benmei to Beixi’s Ziyi, the latter text becomes a key link among these texts and a good reason for salvaging the notion of kogaku.

The Seiky6 y6roku is also important because it landed Sok6 in serious trouble with the bakufu. Unfortunately for Sok6, by the time that his Seiky6 y6roku was published in late 1665,9 Hoshina Masayuki 保科正之 (1611-72), then the most powerful man in the bakufu, had become a devout student of Yamazaki Ansai 山崎関齋 (1618-82), a purist advocate of Zhu Xi’s Neo-Confucian teachings. Masayuki was not the shogun, but he was a close relative and trusted advisor of the ruling Tokugawa family. After all, Hidetada 秀忠 (r. 1605-23), the second shogun, was his father; Iemitsu 家光 (r. 1623-51), the third shogun, was his half-brother; and Ietsuna 家綱 (r. 1651-1680), the fourth shogun, was Masayuki’s ward. These ties made Masayuki an exceptionally authoritative figure. Ansai’s teachings were renowned for their strict fidelity to Zhu Xi’s philosophy; they were also influenced by the ideas of Korean purists such as Yi T‘oegye 李退溪 (1501-70). Like T‘oegye, Ansai sharply criticized Beixi and others who attempted to recapitulate Zhu Xi’s thought. Ansai believed that Neo-Confucian students should focus exclusively on Zhu Xi’s writings, such as his Sishujizhu 四書集注 (Commentaries on the Four Books) and Jinsilu 近思録 (Reflections on Things at Hand). Ansai’s dedication to Zhu Xi was so intense that it occasionally bordered on fanaticism in its intolerance of other thinkers, even Confucian theorists. Sok6’s Seiky6 y6roku surely offended him because it explicitly criticized Song and Ming Neo-Confucian developments, even charging that they criminally misled the world via their distortions of ancient Confucian teachings. Thus, in the tenth month of 1666, about one year after the Seiky6 y6roku was published, Sok6 was banished from Edo indefinitely, Masayuki having had the bakufu declare his writings intolerably outrageous (futodoki naru shomotsu 不屈なる書物).10

9 Because neither of the two versions of the woodblock edition of the Seiky6 y6roku includes the date of publication, it is not clear when the text first appeared. The “Small Preface,” however, bears the date of the tenth lunar month of 1665. Presumably, it was published shortly after, either in late 1665 or early 1666.

10 Virtually all Japanese historians have attributed Sok6’s exile to the machinations of Hoshina Masayuki and his teacher Yamazaki Ansai. Hori’s biography, Yamaga Sok6, pp. 206-230, thoroughly examines the evidence indicating Masayuki’s role in the bakufu decision to exile Sok6. The same verdict is found in Bit6 Masahide 尾藤正英, “Yamaga Sok6,” Kokushi daijiten 国史大辞典 (Encyclopedia of Japanese History), vol. 14 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa k6bunkan, 1993), pp. 116-17; and Tawara Tsuguo, “Yamaga Sok6,” Nihonshugi daijiten 日本史大辞典 (Encyclopedia of Japanese History), vol. 6 (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1994), pp. 836-37. For Sok6’s own account see, Yamaga Sok6, Haisho zanpitsu 配所残筆 (Last Testament Written in Exile), in Yamaga Sok6, Tawara Tsuguo and Morimoto Junichir6 守本順一郎, eds., Nihon shus6 taikai 日本思想体系 (hereafter, NST), vol. 32 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 25
Bakufu guards escorted Sokō to Akō, a small fief located in Harima province along the inland sea. Akō was the designated place of exile because Sokō had earlier, between 1652 and 1660, served its daimyō, Asano Naganao, as a hinshi, or guest instructor, of martial philosophy. Serving the Akō daimyō does not seem to have been Sokō’s first choice; rather his doing so resulted from the post-1651 Tokugawa policy encouraging rōnin, or masterless samurai, to take up service to some lord in one capacity or another.1 Sokō had hoped to become a Tokugawa retainer, but when that did not materialize he accepted Asano Naganao’s request that he become his hinshi. During his second year of service, Sokō helped to oversee the construction of Akō castle, a project that Naganao had worked for since 1645 when he was transferred to Akō, a domain without a castle, from Kasama, a domain with one. For his instruction, Sokō received an annual rice stipend of 1,000 koku. With the exception of a seven-month period during which Sokō was in Akō, supervising the construction of the new castle, he spent his entire tenure as an Asano vassal in Edo, lecturing the Akō daimyō whenever he resided in the bakufu capital. During those years Sokō authored his Bukyō shōgaku (Elementary Learning for Samurai), Bukyō honron (Basic Learning for Samurai), Bukyō yōroku (Essential Learning for Samurai) and Bukyō zensho (Anthology of Samurai Learning). In these works, Sokō reinterpreted Neo-Confucian doctrines, making them exclusively applicable to the samurai estate. As such, Sokō’s teachings which he then referred to as shidō or “the way of the samurai,” were one of the earliest and most systematic attempts at defining a civil ethic for samurai in an age of peace.

In 1660, however, Sokō resigned his stipend and simultaneously announced his willingness to serve other daimyō, though for a higher stipend than the Asano family had been prepared to pay him.12 Perhaps Sokō was hoping to rise in the world of samurai. But between 1660 and 1663, he received no acceptable offers. During that time, he explored Daoist and Zen Buddhist literature, but found no real satisfaction in it. In 1663, he proclaimed his direct reliance on the teachings of ancient Confucianism. Over the next three years he formulated his own brand of Confucianism, which he called seikyō or seigaku, or “the sagely Confucian teachings.” The latter purportedly sought to revive the original teachings of ancient Confucianism while rejecting Neo-Confucian interpretations of them. His disciples recorded these teachings in two key works, the brief Seikyō yōroku and the lengthier Yamaga gorui.

Sokō’s doctrines seem harmless enough today. At a glance they resemble Zhu Xi’s teachings. One Sokō scholar, Bitō Masahide, has even claimed that Sokō’s ideas did not have much of an impact on later kogaku thought because they relied too heavily on Zhu Xi’s understanding of ancient Confucianism even while ostensibly rejecting the same.13 What doomed Sokō’s Seikyō yōroku, however, was not so much its philosophical doctrines as its offensive rhetorical claims. For example, Sokō brashly charged that Neo-Confucians were guilty of the world’s greatest crime because they misled the world while

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12 Cf. Hori, Yamaga Sokō, pp. 176-78.

pretending to explain the Confucian way. Sokō’s students were likewise imprudent, suggesting that their master’s teachings might bring about changes in the government. These two claims alone seem to have suggested that Sokō was a revolutionary of sorts, charging the authorities with crimes and hoping to take charge of the polity as a philosopher-reformer. Though that was probably not Sokō’s intention, his rhetoric could easily have been interpreted as being too self-righteous, accusatory, and politically threatening.

After deciding to exile Sokō, the bakufu generously decreed that the Akō daimyō would supervise him, thus assigning Sokō to a place where he was welcome. The exile was a time of intense study, philosophical ferment, and literary productivity for Sokō. His most seminal work from this period, the Chūchō jijitsu 中朝事実 (The True Reality of the Central Kingdom), glorified the unbroken continuity of the imperial house as the defining feature of Japan’s history which made it rather than China the true “Central Kingdom,” i.e., the place where Confucian teachings were fully realized. It may be tempting to see in this work a shift in Sokō’s allegiances towards the imperial court and away from the bakufu, but that seems unjustified since the Chūchō jijitsu accepts the legitimacy of the bakufu within the imperial system. In other regards, Sokō’s exile passed relatively uneventfully: he never attempted to escape nor did he dream of seeking any kind of revenge, ideological or otherwise, against the bakufu.

Masayuki’s demise in 1672 signalled the beginning of the end of Sokō’s banishment. Three years—the traditional Confucian mourning period—after Masayuki’s death, Sokō was pardoned. He was also permitted to return to Edo and reopen his school, which he relocated in Asakusa 浅草 and called the Sekitokudō 積德堂 (The Hall of Increasing Virtue), but it never regained its former vigor. Sokō was allowed, in the final decade of his life, to resume lecturing to a small group of daimyō and samurai, including his two most devoted and generous followers, the tozama daimyō, Matsuura Shigenobu 松浦鎮信 (1622-1703), lord of Hirado 平戸 domain on Kyushu 九州, and Tsugaru Nobumasa 津軽信政 (1646-1710), lord of Hirosaki 弘前 domain in northwestern Honshu 本州. Yet Sokō was not permitted to offer public lectures to large groups of rōnin as he had done before 1666. Furthermore, the Seikyō yōroku remained a proscribed text, one never again published in the Tokugawa period. The decade of exile had apparently diminished popular samurai interest in the Seikyō yōroku. Ambitious and obliging Tokugawa vassals distanced themselves from Sokō and his tainted ideas. Even Sokō himself, in his final years, developed a new line of thought with his Gengen hakki 原源發機 (Explication of the Cosmic Origins), a rather esoteric metaphysical treatise attempting to explain the workings of the universe via reference to numbers and symbols. By the time of his death from malaria in 1685, both Sokō’s earlier fame and notoriety seem to have become things of the past. Yet in the decades that followed, scholars belonging to both Ogyū Sorai’s and Yamazaki Ansai’s schools lost no opportunities in denouncing Sokō’s writings, knowing that it would be safe to do so since the bakufu itself had earlier branded him a troublemaker.

14 A modern edition of this text, with an explication of Sokō’s thoughts on Japan’s national identity, is found in Nōtomi Yoshitake 納富誠武, Yamaga Sokō no kokutai kan 山鹿素行の國體観 (Yamaga Sokō’s View of the National Polity) (Tokyo: Kaku shobō, 1943).
The 1703 Akō rōnin incident further doomed Sōkō’s teachings, in Edo at least. In 1701 (Genroku 平璃 14), Asano Naganori 浅野長矩 (1665-1701), daimyō of Akō domain, drew his sword and wounded Kira Yoshinaka 吉良義中 (1644-1703), the master of bakufu ceremonies, while participating in a bakufu ritual welcoming imperial messengers conveying New Year’s greetings to the shogun. Traditional accounts explain that Yoshinaka had humiliated Naganori because Naganori refused to provide him with the requisite “gifts.” Whatever the cause of the attack, the bakufu decided that Naganori was solely at fault. It thus ordered him, the same day, to commit suicide as punishment for his violation of the bakufu law regarding altercations within the shogun’s castle. Later, Akō domain was confiscated, leaving the Asano family fiefless and its retainers rōnin. Forty-six of the latter subsequently plotted revenge against their deceased lord’s supposed enemy, Kira Yoshinaka. Led by Oishi Yoshib 尾西良雄 (1659-1703), the Akō rōnin launched a surprise attack on Yoshinaka’s Edo mansion and decapitated him on 12/14 of Genroku 15 (early 1703). After presenting Yoshinaka’s severed head at Naganori’s grave, the rōnin reported their actions to the bakufu. Following lengthy deliberations, the bakufu decided that all forty-six men would commit suicide as punishment for their illegal behavior.15

After the appearance of the Kanadehon Chūshingura 假名手本忠臣蔵 in 1748, the rōnin became heroic figures for many Japanese, representing the ultimate loyalty that devoted samurai were willing to render unto their lord. Following their suicides, there was already some evidence of public fascination with them. For example, in the month of their death, the rōnin were posthumously represented on stage in the play, Akebono Soga no yōchi 曙曾我夜討 (The Soga Brothers’ Nocturnal Revenge), at the Nakamuraza in Edo. The bakufu, however, closed this production just days after it opened. Some essays, such as Muro Kyūsō’s Samurais’ Nocturnal Revenge (Discussion of the Righteous Samurai of Akō Domain, 1703) also appeared praising the rōnin as gishi 義士 or “righteous samurai.”16

The bakufu, however, had declared the rōnin criminals, suggesting that solidarity with them was not the politically correct stance for prudent residents of Edo. Astoundingly, Sōkō and his teachings were soon assigned ideological blame for the rōnin vendetta.17 In 1705, one of Yamazaki Ansai’s disciples, Satō Naokata 佐藤直方 (1650-1719), in his Shijirōku nin no hikki 四十六人之筆記 (Notes on the Forty-Six Samurai) suggested that the Akō rōnin were influenced by the Yamaga teachings.18 A notable

15 For a lengthier discussion of these topics, see Tawara Tsuguo, “Yamaga Sōkō to shidō” 山鹿素行と士道 (Yamaga Sōkō and the Way of the Samurai), in Yamaga Sōkō, Nihon no meicho, vol. 12 (Tokyo: Chūō kōron, 1971).


17 See Hori Isao, Yamaga Sōkō, pp. 267-78, for a critical analysis of claims linking Sōkō to the Akō rōnin incident; Hori shows that there is no evidence proving that Sōkō or Sōkō’s thought directly influenced the Akō rōnin in executing their vendetta. Though many prewar Sōkō enthusiasts, following Inoue Tetsujirō’s studies, praised Sōkō’s impact on the rōnin, the first suggestions associating Sōkō with the Akō rōnin came from critics of Sōkō’s thought.

18 Satō Naokata, Shijirōku nin no hikki, in Kinsei buke shisetsu 近世武家思想 (Early Modern Military Thought) (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1974), Ishii Shirō 石井紫郎, ed., NST, vol. 27, p. 379. However,
follower of Ogyū Sorai (1666-1728) continued these allegations. Sorai's *Shijūshichi shi no koto o ronzu* (Discussion of the Forty-Seven Samurai Incident) does not mention Sokō's teachings as a factor influencing the vendetta. However his disciple, Dazai Shundai 丹吹（1680-1747), did assert that Sorai connected the Akō plot to the teachings of Yamaga Sokō. Shundai's *Akō shijūroku shi ron* (Discussion of the Forty-Six Akō Samurai), written around 1732, several years after Sorai's death (1728), claims, "My teacher Sorai observed, 'The Akō samurai did not understand righteousness. In murdering Lord Kira they illustrated the military teachings of Mr. Yamaga.'"

Shundai further related:

Initially Mr. Yamaga served the Lord of Akō by discoursing on military methodology. It was at this time that Ōishi Yoshio studied Yamaga's teachings. In conspiring to assassinate Lord Kira, Ōishi Yoshio utilized Mr. Yamaga's teachings.... But in not understanding how to vent his rage and resentment over the death of his lord, Ōishi Yoshio revealed that he lacked great righteousness and justice. Mr. Yamaga's teachings are all like that.\(^{19}\)

With the writings of Naokata and Shundai, the posthumous vilification of Sokō's teachings began. Yet, ironically, as Sokō's teachings became, merely on the basis of circumstantial evidence, a pariah form of learning from the perspective of the Tokugawa bakufu, a powerful legend was created, one which appealed to later opponents of the Tokugawa regime. If Sokō's philosophy had the ability to instill in samurai the kind of loyalty that the rōnin exhibited, a loyalty that was oblivious to bakufu laws, then some tozama daimyō at least came to think that Sokō's teachings were worthy of promotion in their own domains. After all, the latter were often only reluctantly loyal to Tokugawa authority. Sokō had failed to sell his samurai philosophy to the bakufu, but his learning became, after being castigated for its alleged anti-bakufu tendencies, something of a success in distant tozama domains such as Chōshū, where animosities towards the Tokugawa continued to simmer. This is especially evident in the life and thought of Yoshida Shōin (1830-59), a late-Tokugawa teacher of Sokō’s ideas who accepted as fact the earlier allegations linking Sokō’s thought and the Akō rōnin; indeed, Shōin regarded the rōnin as personal heroes and extolled them as perfect exemplars of the essence of Sokō's teachings. (To be continued).

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another of Ansai's disciples, Asami Keisai 浅見綱斎 (1652-1711), argued against Naokata's essay in his *Shijūroku shi ron* (On the Forty-Six Samurai). Keisai claimed that it was laughable to blame Yamaga Sokō's teachings for the rōnin vendetta simply because they advocated the use of planning and strategic attack. The same emphases, Keisai claimed, could be found in virtually any military philosophy. See *Kinsei buke shisō*, p. 396.

B. Translation of the Seikyō yōroku (Small Preface and Chapter One)\textsuperscript{20}

Small Preface

As they were transmitted down from antiquity, the subtle meanings of the sagely Confucian teachings gradually became hidden. Scholars of the Han (B.C. 206-220 A.D.), Tang (618-907), Song (960-1279), and Ming (1368-1644) dynasties successively misled their ages about the significance of the ancient sages’ teachings. Misgivings about those sagely teachings thus mounted. If this was true in China, how much more so was it surely the case in Japan? Yet two millennia after Confucius (551-479 B.C.), our teacher Yamaga Sokō (1622-85) appeared, revering what remained of the moral way of the Duke of Zhou (fl. 1111 B.C.) and Confucius. Our teacher has since become the first to revive the essentials of the sagely and moral learning of Confucianism. Through instruction in this learning, one’s understanding becomes all-penetrating. With practice of it, one’s actions become all-effective, regardless of whether they relate to oneself, one’s family, the state, the world, or matters of civil or martial arts. Might not our teacher’s ideas therefore bring about changes in the government of our age? This text records his achievement. If the benefits of his learning are not realized in the world, that is due to Heaven.\textsuperscript{21}

We, our teacher’s disciples, have edited his remarks. Presenting them to him, we suggested, “Your sayings should be reverenced, but they must be kept secret. Your teachings should not be propagated because they contradict the ideas of Han, Tang, Song, and Ming Confucians. Contemporary thinkers whose doctrines differ from yours will surely condemn them.”

Our teacher replied, “Ah! Those small-minded pedants are unworthy of consideration! The Confucian way is the way of the entire world. One must not hide it in one’s embrace. Rather it must be proclaimed broadly so that it will be practiced eternally. If my ideas influence just one person, they will still benefit the entire world! If morally advanced individuals (J. kunshi 君子, C. junzi) are willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of realizing humaneness (J. nin 仁, C. ren),\textsuperscript{22} why should my teachings be kept secret? The world’s greatest crime is misleading others while purporting to explain the moral way. Confucians of the Han and Tang, and those philosophers of the Song and Ming dynasties belonging to the School of Principle (J. rigaku 理学, C. lixue), eloquently sought to resolve perplexities about the moral way. Yet the more they endeavored, the

\textsuperscript{20} This translation is based on the text found in Tawara Tsuguo and Morimoto Junichirō, eds., Yamaga Sokō, NST, vol. 32 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1970), pp. 8-28 (340-47).

\textsuperscript{21} Belief in the providential agency of Heaven goes back to the Chinese Shujing 書經 (Book of History) and Shijing 詩經 (Book of Poetry) where the notion of “the mandate of Heaven” was first adumbrated. Also, cf., Analects, 12/5; Lunyu 論語 (Concordance to the Analects) (hereafter, LYYD), Nie Chongqi 尼常岐, et. al., eds. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1988), p. 22: “Life and death are matters of fate, wealth and honor depend on Heaven.”

\textsuperscript{22} Analects, 15/9; LYYD, p. 31; 4/8, p. 6; 8/13, p. 15; 14/17, p. 28. “The resolute scholar and humane man would never seek life by violating humaneness. Self-sacrifice might even be required in some circumstances for the sake of realizing humaneness.” Confucius further claimed that if one realized the Way in the morning, death that evening would come with peace. He even advised disciples to “defend until death the moral Way.”
more deeply did people doubt the Confucian teachings. Those pedants thus left the ancient sagely teachings in a miserable state. But the Confucian classics are brilliantly clear! One need not belabor them with prolix, burdensome commentaries. Admittedly I lack broad knowledge and am unskilled in rhetoric. How dare I explicate the words of the Duke of Zhou and Confucius or even debate interpretations of them? Yet if I refrain, the misguided claims of pseudo-scholars may never be cleared away.

Confucius advised that “posterity be respected.”23 Dare I then venture a view that might be mistaken? Yet if I circulate my thoughts, others may proclaim, criticize, or debate them. If my mistakes are corrected through such open criticisms, then the Confucian way will benefit from such dialogue. The embarrassment of the Liaodong people over white-headed swine and donkeys24 exemplifies the ignorance resulting from (1) knowing oneself but not others, and (2) failing to examine matters completely.

I see the Duke of Zhou and Confucius as my teachers, not the Han, Tang, Song, and Ming academics! In learning I strive to embody the sagely teachings of the Duke of Zhou and Confucius, not heterodoxies. In behavior I concern myself with matters of daily practicality, not feeling “unconstrained.”25 Perfection in knowledge is attained when one’s understanding penetrates everything. Diligence in action is action pursued energetically! What distresses me is an eloquent Confucian lecturer who is morally deficient in practice. The sages’ way is not something for which individuals should selfishly hope. If practiced by one person but not everyone, it is not the truly moral Confucian way.26 My purpose in life is to proclaim the sagely Confucian teachings in the hope that I might serve someone who can bring them to fruition in the world.

Yielding to Master Yamaga’s wishes, we present the Seikyō yōroku for public consideration. Our teacher’s Yamaga gorui treats in greater depth similar questions pertaining to moral relations between rulers and ministers, fathers and sons, husbands and wives, elder and younger brothers, and friends.

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24 Supposedly, the people of the Liaodong peninsula thought that a white-headed swine born there was so marvelous that they decided to present it to their ruler. Upon learning that white-headed pigs were common in the ruler’s region, they were embarrassed. This parable reveals the folly resulting from ignorance of matters outside one’s own region. According to legends, Liaodong originally had no donkeys. Thus when their tigers first encountered donkeys, they were frightened by their size.


26 Beixi, “The Way,” XLZY, pp. 51a-53a. Cf., Wing-tsit Chan, trans., NCTE, pp. 105-06. “Dao (J. michi; the way) denotes a road. Originally michi signified people on a road. Since roads refer to the ground that many people follow, one would not call something a road if only one person used it. Essentially dao signifies those principles that people should follow in daily affairs and human relations.... Yet in reality, the word dao derives its meaning by extension from places people walk along.”
Chapter One

(1) Sagacity (seijin 聰人)

A sage is one whose knowledge is perfect and whose mind is correct so that he understands everything. A sage’s behavior is earnest, yet in harmony with the order of things. In dealings with others, a sage is natural and easy but also centered in ritual propriety. In governing the state and bringing peace to the world a sage insures that everything attains its proper order. In explaining sagacity, one need not speak of physical appearance, envisioning the sage’s way, or understanding the functions of a sage. One need only recognize that a sage is one who, in the world of daily practicality, perfectly understands and fully follows Confucian rituals without excess or deficiency. In antiquity rulers taught their people the mean and governed them by it. In later ages, however, rulers did not teach the mean. Rather they abdicated their moral authority, merely establishing teachers to instruct the people in their stead. Such was the government of a degenerate age.

The standard that people should assiduously follow is the sagely Confucian way, even though it is true, as Confucius said, that perceptive persons will surpass it while duller sorts may never quite attain it. Those who are praised for a single practice or a sole virtue are actually one-sided. People capable of declining generous stipends or relinquishing mountains of gold as high as the north star are not that rare. Nor is there a shortage of persons so loyal and filial that they would never perpetrate an injustice. Reclusive hermit-scholars and Daoists of renowned integrity who “comprehend...
masculinity”, but forsake the vulgar world, are not few either. Excelling at one task or being famous for just one deed hardly amounts to a fraction of the sagely Confucian way. A true sage is one who totally dwells in the mean. The praise that sages receive is not the result of a single virtue.

(2) Perfecting Knowledge (*chishi 知至*)

Human beings are the most intelligent of all the myriad creatures. Indeed of the various species formed from vital fluids and material energies, none is more brilliant than mankind. And of all humanity, sages and worthies embody perfect knowledge. Duller sorts and unworthy individuals must learn what sages like the Duke of Zhou and Confucius naturally knew. Perfecting knowledge hinges on investigating things. The *Book of Poetry* (*Shijing 詩經*) observes, “Since humanity was created, where there have been things so have there been principles.” By completely investigating things one perfects knowledge, making it all-penetrating. Sages fully investigate all things, enabling their understanding to extend everywhere. The *Book of History* (*Shuijing 書經*) relates how “thinking produces intelligence.” That, in turn, makes sages.

But the more that people know about the world, the more they desire. As a result, human desires seem insatiable. In trying to fulfill their desires, morally advanced individuals therefore deem rightness to be profitable, while common people appreciate profit, but do not understand rightness. Accordingly, morally sophisticated people can enjoy profits, while commoners are never satisfied in pursuing them. Rightness and profit

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36 Cf. *Analects*, 8/1; *LYYT*, p. 14. “The Master said, ‘Tai Bo embodied the highest virtue! yet there was no single thing for which the commoners praised him.’”

37 Cf. *Great Learning*, ch. 1; Shimada, *Daozuo/Chūyō*, pt. 1, p.62. “The extension of knowledge consists in the investigation of things.” Zhu Xi, following Cheng Yi 程頤, emended the *Great Learning* to include the comments: “The meaning of the expression ‘The perfection of knowledge depends on the investigation of things’ is this: If we wish to extend our knowledge to the utmost, we should investigate the principles of everything we encounter. The human mind is formed to understand things; indeed, there is nothing in which its principles do not inhere. Human knowledge is incomplete only because all principles are not fully investigated.... With prolonged striving, one will achieve a wide and far-reaching penetration. Then the qualities of all things will be apprehended, and one’s mind in its total substance and great functioning will become perfectly intelligent. This is called the investigation of things. This is called the perfection of knowledge.”


are not completely different matters. The Book of Changes (Yijing) therefore states, "profit is the harmony produced from rightness." Why rightness exists, profit follows.

Everyone dreams of becoming a sage. Yet since human knowledge is imperfect, many succumbing to heterodoxies which claim to rectify and regulate human passions, turning people instantly into sages. But that is the base way of barbarians! Distinguishing sagely Confucian teachings from vulgar ones hinges on understanding the real significance of rightness and profit. Unless vigorously practiced, the sagely Confucian knowledge remains imperfect. If not accompanied by critical reflection, it amounts to little more than forced reasoning and its practice becomes self-indulgent, despite the energy one might put into it. That is surely not perfection! Only vigorous action, buttressed by critical reflection, perfects the sagely knowledge of Confucianism.

(3) The Sagely Learning (seigaku

Why should anyone bother with the sagely Confucian learning? One should study it to learn the moral way of humanity! Why heed the sagely teachings of the Duke of Zhou and Confucius? Heed them for instruction in the moral way of humanity. Without study, people do not understand the Confucian way. Although excellently endowed in physical disposition and mental faculties, without studying the Confucian way a person will often end up beclouded. Learning consists of studying the ancient Confucian instructions, extending one's knowledge about them, and applying that knowledge to daily matters. When knowledge is perfected, one's material endowment will be positively transformed.

Establishing a moral purpose for one's life is integral to Confucian learning. Unless ethical learning is one's purpose, one's actions will simply be "for the sake of impressing others." There is a structure to the sagely Confucian learning: elementary learning precedes the greater learning, lower-level studies preceed upper-level studies, and there is learning for above average and for below average students. At each level,
certain methods characterize Confucian instruction. For example, the sagely learning requires questioning, and questioning demands scrutiny. One learns nothing without questioning. Practical proficiency is also integral to the sagely learning, thus, as Confucius said, one "studies and in time becomes proficient." The sagely learning requires thought. Unless one thinks, knowledge will never be perfected and attempts at learning will remain muddled. The Song and Ming "School of Mind" (J. shingaku 心學, C. xinxue) and "School of Principle" were infatuated with the mind and captivated by human nature. Such excesses beclouded their learning. They also became mired in trivial details when reading, which signifies that they devoted insufficient effort to the practice of the sagely teachings. The learning of such people is equally beclouded. Excesses and deficiencies like these obfuscate learning.

Confucian learning requires ethical standards. If your purpose in life is morally misguided, then despite daily book reading you will remain unenlightened. While searching for the moral way, perplexities about its principles will continue. Though energetically engaged, you will remain cramped in action. Although praised as a gentleman, you will not understand things clearly. The sage Confucius said, "One might insist that his words are trustworthy and his actions are effective, but he might still be an obstinate commoner!"

(4) The Teacher’s Way (shidō 師道)

Because people are not born with perfect knowledge, teachers instruct them. In Confucian learning the sages are our teachers. For ages none fully understood the sagely Confucian teachings. Those who presumed to teach them were mere assistants instructing others in memorizing words and phrases. The Confucian way penetrates all between heaven and earth. Humanity and the world naturally possess its principles. Persons of worthy words and deeds should be its teachers. Why seek out a single constant teacher? Heaven, earth, and all things can be our teachers!

Cultivating the self requires respectfully choosing, esteeming, and serving a teacher. Unless one esteems the teacher’s way, one’s learning will not be solid. There is

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51 *Analects*, 2/15; *LYJD*, p. 3. "The Master said, ‘Learning from others without critical thought, one will become bewildered.’"


53 Han Yu 胡愈, *Shishuo 師説* (Essay on Teachers), in *Kan Gi Rikuchō Tō So sanbunsen 漢魏六朝 唐宋散文選* (Prose Selections from the Han, Wei, Six Dynasties, Tang, and Song), Itô Masafumi 伊藤正文, ed. (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1970), p. 260. "Since people are not born with perfect knowledge, can anyone be free from doubts?"

54 *Book of Rites*, "Records of Learning"; Legge, *Li Chi*, vol. 2, pp. 89-90. "One who teaches only matters which have been memorized is not fit to be deemed a teacher."


56 Cf. *Great Learning*; Shimada, ed., *Daigaku/Chiyo*, pt. 1, p. 62 "Wishing to cultivate themselves, the ancients corrected their minds."

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a hierarchy among teachers for, after all, there are many technical instructors of diverse, particular skills. However, when teaching the sagely Confucian learning, the depth of one’s seriousness must equal that of rulers and fathers, for the ancients viewed teachers with the same respect that they otherwise reserved for their rulers and fathers. Teachers reveal the beginnings of things, while friends give help concerning personal matters. These are the benefits of teachers and friends.58

(5) Establishing Teachings (rikkyō 立教)

Unless taught, people do not understand the Confucian way. Misunderstanding the way, humans can wreak more havoc than birds and beasts. If not ethically transformed via instruction, people fall prey to heterodoxies, credulously believe perverse theories, worship phantoms, and ultimately even murder their rulers and parents.59 In founding their states and establishing themselves as rulers, ancient kings thus instituted school systems as one of their first tasks. If rulers govern by morally educating their people, then both their ministers and people will be sincerely transformed. With sustained instruction, people will see moral teachings as their customs. Thereupon all will live in natural peace and security. Families, states, and the world have teachings which are specific to them. Nevertheless when morality is unified, the customs of mankind become the same for everyone.

(6) Reading Books (sho o yomu 書を読む)

Books convey the surviving wisdom of ancient and modern times. One thus should read them with all one’s strength. Indeed, one must read as energetically as one pursues daily, practical affairs because Confucian education depends largely on book reading. Education conflicts with daily practicality if one obsessively reads books, neglecting to practice the moral Confucian way as well. If one reads books after having made moral learning one’s purpose in life one will gain immense benefits. But if one reads books thinking that learning consists in nothing else, one ends up like a commoner who, amusing himself with useless playthings, loses his purpose in life.

The books one should read relate the sages’ moral teachings. Confucian teachings are very plain and simple. Whenever one savors them or practices their principles this is fully verified. Other books may be clever, informative, and reliable. And some of their passages should be learned. But when scrutinized from beginning to end, they are seen to be incomplete. They are only aids for broadening one’s capabilities and knowledge. It is unnecessary to explain these points again.

Common fellows emphasize memorization and extensive factual knowledge in their approach to reading books. But devoted readers must refrain from darting about and

57 Analects, 1/8; LYYD; p. 1. “The Master said, ‘If a gentleman lacks self-esteem, others will not respect him either. If such a person studies, his learning will not be reliable.’”
55 Cf. Zhou Dunyi, “Teachers and Friends,” pt. 2, Tongshu; in ST, vol. 2, p. 158. “At birth people are ignorant. Without teachers or friends, people remain stupid even after maturity. However, mankind realizes moral principles through the assistance of teachers and friends.”
56 Cf. Mencius, 3B/9; MZYD, p. 25. “Ministers murdered their rulers and children killed their parents.”
scanning rather than reading. It is best to savor the minutiae of commentaries while taking
the sagely pronouncements of Confucian learning as one’s foundations. Thus should one
directly comprehend Confucian teachings. By doing so, one realizes that the views of
Song and Ming Confucians are lacking.

(7) The Transmission of the Way (dào 道統)

The ten ancient sages, Fu Xi 伏羲, Shen Nong 神農, the Yellow Emperor 黃帝,
Yao 尧, Shun 舜, Yu 舜, Kings Tang 湯, Wen 文, and Wu 武, and the Duke of Zhou 周公, 60
extended their virtue and knowledge to the world, supplying myriad generations
with their blessings. As the Zhou dynasty (1111-249 B.C.) declined, Heaven blessed
humanity with the birth of Confucius. As Mencius 孟子 remarked, “Since the creation of
humanity, there has never been another as great as Confucius.” 61 With his demise,
however, the transmission of the sagely teachings nearly expired. Though they tried,
Zengzi 曾子, Zisi 子思, and Mencius could not peer beyond the vision Confucius
offered. Some Han and Tang scholars sought to revive the transmission of the Confucian
way, but they could not even match Mencius, Zengzi, and Zisi. Following the rise of Song
thinkers such as Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017-73), the two Cheng brothers, Cheng Mingdao
程明道 (1032-85) and Cheng Yichuan 程伊川 (1033-1107), Zhang Zai 張載 (1020-77),
and Shao Yong 邵雍 (1011-77), Confucian teachings underwent egregious
transformations. Those Song academics believed that Confucianism was yang and
heterodoxies yin, as though the two were complementary halves of some greater whole.
In the Song, the transmission of the moral Confucian way was thus obliterated! The
situation became even worse with the rise of Lu Xiangshan 陸象山 (1139-93) and Wang
Yangming’s 王陽明 (1472-1529) many disciples. Only Zhu Xi made major contributions
to studies of the Confucian classics, but even he could not transcend his predecessors’
excesses. Alas! Heaven decides when to entrust individuals with responsibility for seeing
that the Confucian way prevails in the world! Whose efforts can match those of Heaven?

From Mencius’s demise to the Song, Confucianism underwent three
degenerations. The first, during the Warring States’ period (403-222 B.C.), witnessed the
rise of the amoral schools of the Legalists and the writers on political subjects of the Qin
era. 62 The second, evident in Han and Tang literature, involved the sterile work of

60 Fu Xi, a mythological ruler of ancient China, supposedly created the Chinese system of writing, and
parts of the Book of Changes. Shen Nong, another mythic ruler, allegedly invented agricultural
techniques. The Yellow Emperor, another mythic figure, devised methods of statecraft. Yao, Shun, and
Yu are the three sage-kings described in the opening chapters of the Book of History. King Tang
supposedly conquered the Xia dynasty, and founded the Shang. Kings Wen and Wu and the Duke of
Zhou overthrew the Shang and established the Zhou dynasty.
61 Cf. Mencius, 2A/2; MZYD, p. 12.
62 Legalists argued that Confucianism undermined effective rule. They advocated the universal use
of impersonal, absolute laws, enforced without exception by means of a system of extremely harsh
penalties and alluring rewards. The writers on political subjects advocated alliances between states
contiguous either on an east-west, or north-south, axis. These Realpolitik alliances responded to the
many diplomatic and military exigencies of the Warring states’ period. They were unconcerned with
matters of Confucian morality.
commentators, specialists, and logicians. The third transformation involved the abstractions of the Song Schools of Principle and the Mind. From Confucius’s demise to the present, over two thousand years have passed. With these degenerations, the way of the Duke of Zhou and Confucius lapsed into mere subjective ruminations, deceiving and confusing people. Though identifying their ideas with the Confucian sages, the pseudo-Confucians perpetrating these subjective teachings aimed at little more than Yanzi’s 颜子 pleasures or Zeng Dian’s 任点 disposition. Such debased customs have long prevailed. Alas! It must be the decree of Heaven!

(8) Poetry and Prose (shibun 詩文)

“Poetry expresses one’s aspirations.” When one harbors aspirations, language spontaneously emerges communicating them. Ancient verses have an elegance that is natural and appropriate to them. Some odes express aspirations through remonstration and satire, some through critical discussions of justice. Others speak of beautiful landscapes. Some poems admonish, while others extoll contemporary government or the virtues of rulers and ministers. The six kinds of ancient poetry overflowed with such themes. Poetry students of later ages, however, have strained to express their unique, subjective thoughts with fine, eloquent words. Yet their verses ended as vacuous lies. Thus latter-day poets have become the world’s worst idlers and hedonists.

Poets often make the mistake of thinking that they must use the philosophical language of the Confucian classics, discuss the moral way and its virtues, humaneness and rightness, and encompass all ethical teachings. But does the moral learning of Confucianism need to rely on the emotive techniques of poetry? Numerous Song and Ming Confucians were beclouded over the relationship between poetry and moral learning because they misunderstood the sagely Confucian way.

Prose refers to the discursive language used in writing books. The Confucian sages and worthies could not help but articulate their thoughts in prose. Later writers had only eloquence and insinuating faces. In unsubstantial matters, they searched for curiosities from which to create fictions. Han Tuizhi 韓退之 (768-824), Liu Zongyuan

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64 Book of Poetry, “Great Preface,” Legge, CC, vol. 4, p. 34.
65 According to the Book of Poetry’s “Great Preface,” the six types of poetry are: (1) popular poems, (2) descriptive poems, (3) metaphorical poems, (4) allusive poems, (5) imperial verses, and (6) religious hymns. See Legge, CC, vol. 4, p. 34.
66 Analects, 1/3; LYYD, p. 1. “The Master said, “Eloquence and an insinuating face are rarely associated with humaneness.”
柳宗元 (773-819), Ou Yangxìu (歐陽修 1007-72), and Su Shi (蘇軾 1037-1101) were premier prose stylists, but their learning was perverse. Their prose was too refined and unsubstantial.

67 A poet and essayist, Han Tuizhi (Han Yu 賀 steep) advocated Confucianism in an age still dominated by Buddhism and Daoism. Some view him as a forerunner of the Song Neo-Confucians. Liu Zongyuan was a friend of Han Yu’s and one of the premier poets and essayists of the Tang. Ouyang Xiu was an official, literary master, and historian who lived in the early Song dynasty. He advocated a return to the ancient style of writing as Han Yu had done in the Tang. Su Shi was one of the outstanding scholar-poet-statesmen of his day. His writings reveal an interest in Buddhism and Daoism, as well as Confucianism.