
**Abstract:** Current scholarship on Tokugawa Japan tends to see China as either a model or the other. This study aims to provide a new perspective by suggesting that China also functioned as building blocks for Tokugawa intellectuals to forge Japan’s own thought and culture. They selectively introduced and then modified Chinese culture to make it fit into the Japanese tradition. Chinese culture was highly localized in Tokugawa Japan. Chinese terms and forms survived, but the substance and the spirit were turned into Japanese. Hence, Sino-Japanese cultural exchange in the early modern period should be perceived as the interplay of the Japanization of Chinese culture and the Sinicization of Japanese culture.
The China Factor in Tokugawa Culture: Beyond Model and the Other
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Introduction
Although the Edo bakufu did not establish formal political ties with Qing China and the China trade was restricted to the port of Nagasaki, the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) was the heyday of Sino-Japanese intellectual and cultural exchanges. Tokugawa scholars engaged in Chinese learning mainly through imported classical Chinese texts rather than direct person-to-person interaction.\(^1\) To Tokugawa Japanese, China was a unique existence that played an important role in shaping Japanese thought and culture. Without China, Tokugawa intellectual life would not have been so flourishing and creative. Current scholarship on Tokugawa Japan tends to see China as either a model or the other. This study aims to provide a new perspective by suggesting that China also functioned as building blocks. In other words, the people of the Tokugawa period transformed and appropriated Chinese elements to forge Japan’s own thought and culture. Chinese culture became highly localized and hybridized. The three perceptions of China reflect different attitudes of Tokugawa intellectuals towards Chinese culture. These images of China could coexist in the same individual or intellectual school, serving as a reminder of the diversity and ambiguity in Tokugawa thought.

1. China as Model
Sinophilia was by no means a minor intellectual current among Tokugawa intellectuals, embraced not only by Confucians and Sinologists, but was prevalent in different schools of thought and culture.\(^2\) Travelling to China was almost impossible and Tokugawa Confucians and Sinologists could only visit China in their dreams. China became a nostalgic and blissful cultural homeland and utopian imaginary. Fujiwara Seika 藤原惺窩 (1561-1619) yearned to make a cultural pilgrimage to China, but the long distance and the rough sea made the journey impossible. He wrote: “I always admire

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Chinese culture and I want to see its cultural relics myself.” In 1600, he paid a visit to Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616) wearing his homemade Confucian-scholar costume. Kumazawa Banzan (1619-1691) and Kaibara Ekken (1630-1714) praised China as the “teacher-nation” (shi-kuni 師国), being very grateful to China for enlightening different aspects of Japan. Banzan stressed that the impact of Chinese culture on Japan was all-round and far-reaching:

China is the teacher-nation for the four seas and has contributed tremendously to Japan. Rites, music, books, mathematics, architecture, costume, transportation, agricultural tools, weapons, medicine, acupuncture, officialdom, ranking, military codes, the way of archery and riding, and miscellaneous skills and technologies were all imported from China.4

Ekken also acknowledged Japan’s indebtedness to China for introducing morality and etiquette:

Japan is pure and awesome in social customs and is indeed a very fine nation. It is appropriate to refer to it as the Nation of the Gentlemen. However, in uncivilized antiquity, Japan had neither etiquette nor law. There was no dress code either. Wearing the hair down, folding the clothes to the left, and marrying one’s own sisters or nephews were very common. In the middle ages, Japan communicated frequently with China, learning from it and changing our customs. One can refer to the national histories to understand this. Although Japan has never been subordinated to China, it has been extensively adopting Chinese customs and teachings. Hence, China can be called the teacher-nation. We must not forget the foundation of China and should not look down upon it.5

Ogyū Sorai (1666-1728) expressed his passion for all things Chinese as follows: “I have been indulging in the study of the Chinese classics and admiring Chinese civilization ever since I was a child.”6 The Chinese civilization that he admired refers to

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the way of the Sages of the Three Dynasties. He called China “chūka” (central efflorescence or central civilization) and “chūgoku” (central kingdom) and himself Nihonkoku ijin (the barbarian of the nation of Japan) and tōi no hito (eastern barbarian). He regretted very much that he was not born in the land of the sages and “no sages were born in the Eastern Sea.”

Sorai was not alone with regard to his attitude towards Chinese culture. Basically Tokugawa intellectuals from different Confucian schools enthusiastically introduced Chinese morality and etiquette. What Tokugawa Japanese admired was not the Qing dynasty ruled by the Manchus, but the Three Dynasties under the sage-kings and the great Han and Tang dynasties. Their tendency to emphasize the past and belittle the present was salient. Tokugawa Sinophiles demonstrated a high level of confidence and nativist consciousness and some held the concept of kai hentai (the transformation from civilized to barbarian and vice versa), seeing Japan as the new center of Confucian order in East Asia.

The Edo bakufu and some domains promoted Chinese learning. The fifth Tokugawa shogun Tokugawa Tsunayoshi (1646-1709) and the second daimyō of Mito, Tokugawa Mitsukuni (1628-1701), were representative Sinophiles. Tsunayoshi was engrossed in the study of the Yijing (Classic of Changes). For eight years, he had chaired the Yijing public lecture series for 240 times, asking courtiers, retainers, Confucians, Buddhist monks, Shinto priests, merchants, and commoners to attend.

Mitsukuni treated the Ming refugee scholar Zhu Shunshui with respect, following his advice to promote Confucian education, enact Ming court costumes, build a Confucian temple and construct the “West Lake.

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9 The disdain that many Tokugawa Japanese had for Qing politics and scholarship was not always fair. The Tō-fūsetsugaki 唐風説書 (Reports of Rumors from the Chinese) that the Chinese captains submitted to bakufu officials in Nagasaki introduced regional rebellions and chaos rather than achievements of Qing China. Few Tokugawa scholars, perhaps with the exception of Yoshida Kōton 吉田篁墩 (1745-1798) and Ōta Kinjō 大田錦城 (1765-1825), took Qing culture seriously.

10 For a large number of examples, see: Marius Jansen, China in the Tokugawa World (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), chapter 2, pp. 53-92; and Tsujimoto Masashi 辻本雅史, Kinset kyōiku shisō shi no kenkyū 近世教育思想史の研究 (History of Educational Thought in the Early Modern Period) (Kyoto: Shibunkaku shuppan, 1990).

embankment” in the Koshikawa Kōrakuen Garden in Edo.  

Tokugawa Confucians were confident in their ability to read Confucian classics, but they sought advice and recognition from Chinese scholars in Chinese poetry (Kanshi 漢詩), calligraphy and drawing. Composing Chinese poetry was a common pastime in the Edo period when the Japanese wrote more Chinese poems than Japanese poems. Arai Hakuseki 新井白石 (1657-1725), a bakufu advisor and historian, attempted to send his Chinese poems to China for suggestions on how to improve them. Most Tokugawa calligraphers preferred karayō 唐様 (Chinese style) to wayō 和様 (Japanese style) and model calligraphy inscriptions of the Tang and Song dynasties were most popular. Some went to Nagasaki to study calligraphy under Chinese monks or scholars. Works by Chinese Ōbaku Zen monks were highly esteemed.

To most Tokugawa Japanese, China was unreachable. What they could contact were only Chinese migrants including monks, merchants, and Chinese interpreters (Tōtsūji 唐通事) in Nagasaki. Chen Yuanyun 陳元贇 (1587-1671), Yinyuan Longqi 隱元隆琦 (1592-1673), Zhu Shunshui, and Shen Nanping 沈南蘋 (b. 1682) were little known in Ming-Qing China, but etched their names in Japanese history. Chen Yuanyun was invited by Tokugawa Yoshinao 徳川義直 (1600-1650), the first lord of Owari, to move to Edo where he taught samurai martial arts. Yinyuan Longqi was the founder of the Ōbaku school of Zen Buddhism in Japan. The emperor, courtiers, bakufu retainers, daimyo, and merchants came to study Buddhism under him. Zhu Shunshui was an influential figure in Tokugawa Confucianism and historiography. Though not a man of letters, he was often asked by the Japanese scholars to comment on their Chinese poems. His “written dialogues” (hitsudan 筆談) include many discussions of Chinese poetry. Shen Nanping taught the Japanese bird-and-flower painting during his two-year sojourn in Nagasaki.

When Tokugawa Japanese could not find Chinese sojourners in Nagasaki, they knocked at the door of Chinese interpreters who were descendants of Chinese immigrants. For example, Ogyū Sorai learned modern colloquial Chinese from Okajima Kanzan 岡島冠山 (1674-1728). Kumashiro Yūhi 熊代熊斐 (1712-1773), the most important

14 Ishizaki Matazo 石崎又造, Kinsei Nihon ni okeru Shina zokugo bungaku shi 近世日本における支那俗語文學史 (A History of Chinese Vernacular Literature in Early Modern Japan)
disciple of Shen Nanping in Nagasaki, became a leading figure and influential teacher in painting. The calligraphy of Hayashi Dōei 林道栄 (1640-1708) and the seven-stringed zither of Ga Chōshin 何兆晉 (1628-1686) also attracted students. Although Chinese interpreters were low-ranking officials, they were respected as the spokesmen of Chinese culture.

The interest in China among Tokugawa intellectuals was genuine and ardent. Chinese culture continued to inspire the Japanese in all walks of life. In particular, many Tokugawa Confucians regarded the Chinese as their mentors, proudly sharing common identity with the Chinese as members of the Confucian tradition in East Asia.

2. China as the Other

China meant different things to different people in the Tokugawa period, regarded as a model by Sinophiles and condemned as the other by nativists. The attitudes of the Tokugawa Japanese towards China were often complicated and ambivalent. Confucians worshipped the way of the ancient Chinese sages, but looked down upon the Qing dynasty under the Manchus. Many believed that Confucian traditions were faithfully implemented in Tokugawa Japan whereas they were forgotten in Qing China. According to the concept of kai hentai, Japan replaced China as the center of Confucian civilization. Yamaga Sokō 山鹿素行 (1622-1685), a Confucian and strategist, pointed out that Japan surpassed China in geography, political morality, religion, literacy, and military arts, and thus only Japan would deserve to be called chūka and chūgoku. He explained:

Regarding the movement of heaven and earth and the four seasons, if these reach a balance, wind and rain and cold and heat will not disappear. The soil will turn fertile and the people will become clever. One may then speak of a “Central Kingdom” [chūgoku]. In the whole world, only our nation [honchō] and the alien nation [gaichō, i.e. China] have achieved this balance. In the Age of the Gods, Ame-no-minaka-nushi-no-kami [天御中主尊, i.e., the God of Creation] and the two divinities of creation [Izanami 伊邪那美命 and Izanagi 伊邪那岐命] shaped our nation in the [area of the] central pillar. Hence, it is natural to call our nation the “Central Kingdom.” This is why our nation has the divine and unbroken lineage of the imperial family and enjoys superiority in literacy and military arts.

(Tokyo: Kōbundō shobō, 1940), pp. 56-60.
Likewise, Tokugawa Mitsukuni also maintained that the Japanese political tradition of maintaining the unbroken lineage of the imperial family reigning over the nation was superior to Chinese political tradition of revolution and therefore only Japan would deserve to be called chūka. He said: “According to Morokoshi [毛呂己志, China], the Chinese call their nation chūka. We Japanese should not follow that. We should call the capital of Japan chūka. Why do we call the foreign nation chūka?”17

While Edo Confucians were torn in their views of China between seeing it as a model and the other, scholars from kokugaku 国学 (national learning), Shinto, the Kimon school 崎門学派 and the late Mito school often saw China in a negative light. By condemning China as the other, they constructed their own nativist consciousness. Unlike Edo Confucians who remained respectful of ancient Chinese sages, they denied the entire cultural heritage from the Three Dynasties to the Ming and Qing. For example, the kokugaku scholar Kamo Mabuchi 賀茂真淵 (1697-1769) demonized China to underline the supreme quality of Japan:

China is the land of evil intentions. Education can make it look good on the surface, but it remains evil inside. Social unrest is unavoidable. Japan is a simple nation. Although our people receive little education, they are obedient. Following the principle of heaven and earth, our people can do without education.”18

The kokugaku master Motoori Norinaga 本居宣長 (1730-1801) condemned the ancient Chinese sages for establishing Confucian morality and profound philosophy to fool the people and to rule over them. In his comparison of the political traditions in Japan and China, China was “the other” to underscore the superiority and uniqueness of Japan’s nationality. For instance, he pointed out that the unbroken lineage of the imperial family brought peace and stability to Japan, whereas revolution caused chaos and social unrest in China. He compared Shinto in Japan and shendao 神道 in China as follows:

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A book of the Tang [Yijing] reads: “The sages established Shinto [shendao],” Some people thus believe that our nation borrowed the name “Shinto” from it. These people do not have a mind to understand the principles of things. The meaning of our deities has been different from that nation from the beginning. In that nation, people apply the concept of *yin* and *yang* to explain deities, spirits, and the universe. Their discussion is only empty theory without substance. Deities in our imperial nation were the ancestors of the current imperial emperor and thus [Japanese Shinto] is by no means empty theory.

Sasaki Takanari 佐々木高成 (fl. 1737), a scholar of the Kimon school, referred to China as an inferior nation (kakoku 下国): “The customs of the Western Land (seido 西土) are radical and dirty. It has been a land of beasts since its founding. Our nation is a land of deities, having moral standards and a good balance between *yin* and *yang*.”

Fukagawa Yūei 深河猷栄 (1695-1768), a Shinto priest, looked down upon the Chinese, calling them “Han barbarians” (Han‘i 漢夷) because they did not implement the way of loyalty and filial piety. He held that only Japan was entitled to the name *chūgoku* or *chūka*:

That nation calls itself the Central Civilization (*chūka*) and our imperial nation a barbarian [nation]. Indeed, only our nation deserves to be called *chūka* or *chūgoku*. That nation is nothing but barbaric… We should uphold the dignity of our imperial nation. However, many Confucians nowadays call the nation of the Han barbarians [Han‘i 漢夷] *chūka, chūgoku*, or a nation of sages and gentlemen, but refer to our imperial nation as a nation of barbarians without manners and principles.

It is interesting to note that in Tokugawa discourse, China was a loose and fuzzy concept, being an imaginary model to Tokugawa Sinophiles and a metaphor of otherness in the eyes of the nativists. Throughout Tokugawa history, China was gradually

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marginalized in the worldview of the Japanese. In the last decades of the Tokugawa period, Qing China became a negative example for Japan. China and the Chinese were called *Shina* (derogatory term for China) and *chankorō* (derogatory term for the Chinese) with disdain respectively. De-Confucianization and de-Sinicization were in full swing, smoothing the way for the rise of the notion of escaping from Asia (*datsu-Aron* 脫亞) in modern Japan.

3. **China as Building Blocks**

Seeing China as the model and the other were two major Tokugawa perceptions of China. Regarding the role of China in the making of Tokugawa thought and culture, China served as building blocks. Rather than copying faithfully from the Chinese, Tokugawa Japanese used Chinese elements to build and enrich their own thought and culture. Naitō Konan 内藤湖南 (1866-1934), a leading Sinologist in prewar Japan, used the making of tofu as a metaphor to describe how Chinese elements (soya bean milk) and Japanese elements (coagulant) were mixed to forge Japanese culture (tofu):

> Japanese scholars use a tree to explain the birth of Japanese culture. The seed has been there for a long time. Chinese culture provides the nutrients for the tree to grow. I would like to compare it to making tofu. The bean liquid is there, but it requires something to condense. Chinese culture is the coagulant that can make it firm.

Konan argued that many things have existed in Japan for a long time but they do not have a name or concept, and thus the Japanese use Chinese terms and ideas to explain Japan’s indigenous culture. He used loyalty and filial piety as an example:

> Undoubtedly “loyalty” (chū 忠) and “filial piety” (kō 孝) are terms imported from China, but Japan has possessed the virtues of loyalty and filial piety. There is a tendency [for the Japanese] to use imported Chinese terms to explain what Japan already has.

Takeuchi Yoshio 武内義雄 (1886-1966), a disciple of Konan, expressed a similar view

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26 Ibid.
in his discussion of the nature and function of Confucianism in Japan. He suggested that Confucianism provided a platform for Tokugawa scholars to explain and elaborate Japanese values.\(^{27}\) For example, the Tokugawa Japanese placed emphasis on the virtue of sincerity (誠 cheng) because it was in accordance with the spirit of Shinto. Bitō Masahide 尾藤正英 (1923-2013), a scholar of Edo intellectual history, pointed out that Tokugawa Confucianism was Japanized Confucianism that used imported Chinese terms to promote indigenous thought.\(^{28}\)

Besides cultural appropriation, another form of using Chinese culture as building blocks was hybridization. Inoue Tetsujirō 井上哲次郎 (1856-1944), a semi-official philosopher who published Tokugawa Confucian writings to promote traditional values, identified early Tokugawa Confucianism as an eclectic synthesis that fused the Cheng-Zhu school, the Lu-Wang school, Confucian classics, history, literature, Buddhism, Shinto, Daoism, and Japanese learning (wagaku 和學) together.\(^{29}\) Kurozumi Makoto 黑住真, a specialist in Tokugawa intellectual history, also highlights eclecticism as the major feature of Tokugawa thought, seeing the history of Tokugawa thought as the process of fusing Chinese, Shinto, Buddhist and Western elements.\(^{30}\)

In the process of cultural appropriation and hybridization, Chinese culture, together with Western, Indian, and indigenous cultures, provided Tokugawa Japanese building blocks to construct their own thought and culture. The same Chinese term could mean different things in China and Tokugawa Japan. This can be seen from how the Tokugawa Japanese reinterpreted Chinese historical figures, classics, and historical terms.

(a) Historical figures as building blocks

Wu Taibo 吳太伯, Xu Fu 徐福, and Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 (719-756) were household names in Japan. Their images and legends in Japan were uniquely different from their prototypes in China, showing the rise of nativist consciousness among the Tokugawa Japanese.

Wu Taibo was transformed from a Chinese sage into the ancestor of the Japanese imperial family. This idea was supported by Fujiwara Seika, Hayashi Razan 林羅山 (1583-1657) and Nakae Tōju 中江藤樹 (1608—1648). Hayashi Gahō 林鵞峰 (1618-1680) praised Taibo for preserving the way of the sages in Japan as the imperial


ancestor. Kumazawa Banzan speculated that Taibo was the Sun Goddess Amaterasu-ōmikami 天照大神, the most important Shinto deity and the divine ancestor of the imperial family.

Descended from Zhou, Japan is thus named the nation of Ji in the Eastern Sea [Tōkai himeshi no kuni 東海姫氏国]. It is the name for females, and in Japan we call females hime. Hime is the honorific term for women and the surname of Zhou. Amaterasu was Taibo. The statue of Uhōdōji 雨寶童子 [rainmaking boy] was made in the image of Amaterasu, reflecting the image of Taibo and the haircutting custom of Wu. Japanese clothing is called gofuku [吳服] and utensils are goki [吳器]. They are all related to the state of Wu [go in Japanese].

The advocates of Wu Taibo as the imperial ancestor sought to give Japan a respectable place in the Confucian order, as the Japanese were no longer the eastern barbarians but the descendants of an ancient Chinese sage and the preservers of the way of the sages. Associating Taibo with Shinto legend was an expression of the syncretism of Shinto and Confucianism in the Tokugawa period.

The legend of Xu Fu reached its apex in the Tokugawa period. More than twenty places in Japan claimed to have legacies of Xu Fu and many Tokugawa writings mentioned Xu. Xu was merely a Qin sorcerer in the eyes of the Chinese. The Tokugawa Japanese regarded him either as the transmitter of Chinese culture or political refugee. These two views apparently represented the competition between Sinophiles and nativists, but they were indeed different expressions of Japanese identity. Hayashi Razan, Kumazawa Banzan, and Arai Hakuseki saw Xu as the transmitter of ancient Chinese culture, praising him for bringing pre-Qin texts, morality, and advance technologies to Japan. Banzan remarked: “Xu Fu introduced Confucian morality, public manners, and various institutions. He found refuge in Japan and settled down here with thousands of followers. Although some Chinese classics disappeared in China, they survived overseas.” Matsushita Kenrin 松下見林 (1637-1703), Ono Takakyo 小野高潔 (1747-1817) and Satō Setsudō 斎藤拙堂 (1797-1865) portrayed Xu as a political refugee who found his ideal nation in Japan. Kenrin wrote: “Xu Fu saw the national glory of Japan and came to settle down there. He escaped from the Qin, the land of tigers and leopards, and died in Japan as a deity.” Using Xu Fu to glorify Japan was a very

32 Ibid., pp. 144-45.
33 Matsushita Kenrin, Ishō Nihonden 異稱日本伝 (An Alternative Edition of Japanese History),
original idea and a good example of the localization of Chinese culture. The Xu Fu legend was mixed with Japanese Shinto mythology and folklore in Tokugawa writings.

The Chinese beauty Yang Guifei was seen as the manifestation of a Shinto deity. According to some medieval and early modern Japanese texts, Shinto deities sent Atsuta Myōjin 熱田明神 to take the form of Yang Guifei to infatuate Emperor Xuanzong of Tang 唐玄宗 (685-762) so that he forgot his plan to invade Japan. When Yang died, the spirit of Atsuta Myōjin returned to Atsuda Shrine. The jōruri play, Yōkihi monogatari 楊貴妃物語 (1663), fabricated a dialogue between Emperor Xuanzong and the great poet Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846). Bai blamed the emperor as follows:

Your Majesty, you are the cause of this misfortune. Your obsession with Yang Guifei’s beauty caused all the chaos. There is a country called Japan in the East. Yang Guifei was its Atsuta Myōjin. She was born in our nation as a woman provisionally to create troubles. Shame on her!34

Kanō school painter Kanō Einō 狩野永納 (1631-1697) further added that many evil characters in Tang China were indeed Japanese deities who transformed into Chinese in order to save Japan from invasion. He wrote:

It is said that, in the Tang era, Japan frequently paid tribute to China. When the gifts were few, the Chinese killed Japanese envoys. Xuanzong sought to annihilate Japan. Atsuta Myōjin was Yamato-Takeru-no-Mikoto 日本武尊. This deity transformed into Yang Guifei, Sumiyoshi Myōjin 住吉明神 turned into An Lushan 安祿山, and Kumano-no-Ōkami 熊野大神 turned into Yang Guozhong 楊國忠. They went to Tang China to destroy Xuanzong.35

Yang Guifei as the manifestation of a Shinto deity was the Shinto version of the doctrine of honji suijaku 本地垂迹 (Japanese deities were manifestations of the Buddha or bodhisattva) and an expression of gokoku 護国 (the protection and prosperity of the state). Yang was considered an evil beauty in the eyes of the Chinese, but was respected by some Japanese as a guardian deity or protector of Japan.

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(b) Confucian classics as building blocks

Confucian classics were popular readings among Tokugawa scholars from different schools of thought and religion. In order to accommodate Confucian values into the Tokugawa system and Japanese tradition, Tokugawa Japanese interpreted Confucian classics in their own ways to promote Japanese indigenous values rather than original Chinese teachings.

The Mengzi 孟子 (The Sayings of Mencius) was not highly rated among Tokugawa scholars as its ideas were not always in agreement with Japanese political tradition and the Tokugawa system. In particular, the notions of revolution and regicide were considered incompatible, dangerous, and disloyal. The Kimon school, the Sorai school, kokugaku, and the early Mito school were critical of the text. Although the Mencius contains many relatively liberal political ideas, it was used by Yoshida Shōin 吉田松陰 (1830-1859) to advocate conservative political ideology. For instance, he reinterpreted tenmei 天命 (mandate of heaven) as “the order of the tennō” (emperor). Receiving the mandate of heaven meant being appointed by the imperial family to be the shogun and this mandate could be taken away by the emperor if the shogun failed to carry out his duties. He gave the Edo bakufu the most serious warning: “Posts like that of shogun are appointed by the imperial court only for those who can carry out the duties of those posts. If the shogun shirks his duties like the Ashikaga house did, he should be sacked immediately.”

The Xiaojing 孝經 (Classic of Filial Piety) is a book about filial piety, but it was used to promote loyalty in Tokugawa Japan. Tokugawa samurai ethics puts loyalty before filial piety. The bakufu preferred the old-script edition (guwen 古文) of the Xiaojing which underlines the absolute authority of the ruler. Hayashi Razan, in his Kobun kōkyō genkai 古文孝經諺解 (Colloquial Explanation of the Xiao Jing in the Old-Script Text), restated the famous saying in the preface by Kong Anguo 孔安國: “Even if the emperor does not behave like an emperor, his minister cannot be disloyal. Even if the father does not behave like a father, his son cannot be unfilial.” In terms of the order of the five constant relations (wulun 五倫 or wujiao 五教), the Mencius places father and son ahead of emperor and minister. However, in Tokugawa Japan, many Zhu Xi school scholars and Mito school scholars put the ruler-subject relation prior to that of the father-son relation.

The Yijing 易經 (Classic of Changes) was localized in Tokugawa Japan, used by nativists to expound Shinto ideas. The Shintoist Watarai Nobuyoshi 度会延佳

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(1615-1690) explained the history of the Age of the Gods and Shinto thought in terms of Yijing-related concepts such as taiji 太極 (Supreme Ultimate), yinyang wuxing 隱陽五行 (two primal forces and five phases), sancai 三才 (three spheres of nature), and the hexagrams. The kokugaku thinker Hirata Atsutane 平田篤胤 (1776-1843) and his disciples turned the Yijing from a Confucian classic into a Shinto text, maintaining that Fu Xi 伏羲, according to tradition the creator of the eight trigrams, was the manifestation of the Shinto deity Ōmono-nushi-no-kami 大物主神 who went to China in antiquity to cultivate the Chinese:

Paoxishi庖犧氏 is also called Taihao Fu Xi shi 太昊伏羲氏. He was actually Ōmono-nushi-no-kami, a deity of our divine nation of Fusō 扶桑. He went to ancient China to exploit its land and became the emperor. He taught its foolish people the ways of heaven, earth, and humanity. By observing the changes of the universe and everything, he created the trigrams.38

Atsutane saw the Zhouyi as a corrupt edition of the Yijing, condemning King Wen for distorting the text and changing the order of the sixty-four hexagrams and the number of yarrow stalks to justify the revolution that overthrew the Shang dynasty. His academic mission was to restore the original Yijing. Regarding the Yijing as a Shinto text, scholars of the Hirata school used its related ideas to explicate Shinto and divination for agriculture.

(c) Historical terms as building blocks

The appropriation of Chinese concepts and terms was very common in Tokugawa Japan. Many imported Chinese terms were interpreted and used differently. Names for China, bakufu, and shogun, as well as the discussion of legitimacy in Tokugawa historiography are examples of how meanings of Chinese terms can be twisted to express Japanese values and feelings.

Following the rise of the theory of kai hentai and the Japanese version of the Sinocentric world order, some Tokugawa Japanese applied honorific names originally reserved for China to Japan. Yamaga Sokō, in his last years, referred to Japan as chūka. He remarked: “How foolish I was! Born in the Central Kingdom (chūka, i.e., Japan), but failing to understand its beauty, I was absorbed in the classics of the foreign dynasty (gaichō 外朝, i.e., China) and admired its people. How absent-minded I was! How lost I was!”39 The historian Rai Sanyō 頼山陽 (1781-1832) called Japan chūgoku and chūchō


Honorable titles for the Edo bakufu and shōgun (such as kōgi 公儀, kubō 公方, chōtei 朝廷, taikun 大君, denka 殿下 and kinchū 禁中) were mostly imported Chinese terms that at first applied to the Kyoto court and emperor. In the last decades of the Tokugawa period, many titles that the bakufu and shōgun had acquired from the court were restored to their original meanings and usage. The Mito scholar Fujita Tōko 藤田東湖 (1806-1855) insisted that titles for the imperial court should not be applied to the Edo bakufu: “The innocent people refer to the bakufu as the central court government (chōtei), and some even as the king (ō).”

Tokugawa historians created their own concepts of legitimacy (such as the theories of imperial regalia) and redefined imported Chinese concepts (such as heaven’s mandate) to rationalize the Tokugawa political realities. The Dai Nihon shi 大日本史 (History of Great Japan, 1657-1906) claimed legitimacy for the Southern Court because it was the holder of the three imperial regalia. The regalia theory had a very strong impact on the Kimon school and the Mito school. Tokugawa Harutoshi 徳川治紀 (1773-1816), the seventh daimyō of Mito, argued: “The conflict between the East and West, the civil war between the North and South, and the legitimacy of the imperial line can all be settled by the regalia.” Besides, the mandate of heaven, in Tokugawa historical writings, was used primarily to discuss the right to govern and deny a Chinese-style “revolution” and dynastic change. This Japanese version of heaven’s mandate became an ideological tool to legitimize the bakufu as the de facto central government. Ironically, the same theory was applied to challenge the legitimacy of the bakufu in the bakumatsu 幕末 period (late Tokugawa era, 1853-1867). Yoshida Shōin warned: “The descendants of the Sun Goddess in our heavenly dynasty shine on the universe. If the bakufu does not follow the order of the heavenly dynasty and does not carry out its duty to repel the barbarians, the situation is called ‘using the state of Yan to fight against the state of Yan.’”

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41 Tokugawa Harutoshi, Shin Dai Nihon shi hyō 進大日本史表 (The Memorial on the Great History of Japan), quoted in Yamazaki Tōkichi 山崎藤吉 and Horie Hideo 堀江秀雄, Nanbokuchō seijun ronsan 南北朝正閏論纂 (Discourse on the Southern and Northern Courts Controversy over Legitimacy) (Tokyo: Kōtenkōyūjo Kokugakuin daigaku shuppan tosho hanbaijo, 1911), p. 158.
42 Kōmō yowa, p. 279.
4. Concluding Remarks

China in the Tokugawa imagination was complicated and multifaceted. In understanding the China factor in Tokugawa culture, we should think beyond the traditional dialectical framework of model and the other. China also functioned as building blocks to construct Tokugawa culture. The tripartite conceptual framework helps to achieve a holistic understanding of the nature of Tokugawa culture. Sino-Japanese cultural exchange in the early modern period should be perceived as the interplay of the Japanization of Chinese culture and the Sinicization of Japanese culture. The Tokugawa Japanese selectively introduced and then modified Chinese culture to make it fit into the Japanese tradition. Used largely as building blocks to construct Japanese culture, Chinese culture was highly localized and hybridized in Tokugawa Japan. In the name of *Wakon Kansai* 和魂漢才 (Japanese spirit and Chinese scholarship), Chinese terms and forms survived, but the substance and the spirit became Japanese. Hence, it is simplistic and even misleading to see Tokugawa Confucianism or Chinese learning as an overseas branch of Chinese culture. Characterized by eclecticism and pragmatism, Chinese scholarship in Tokugawa Japan was different from Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism or Qing textual criticism. The China factor was influential in Tokugawa thought and culture in the sense that it was used extensively by the Japanese to express and reinforce Japanese ideas and values.