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In this essay I trace the rise of, and motivation behind, the popular ethics movement in Edo Period Japan, specifically within the context of the religio-political agenda of the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868). The subversive philosophical root of "ancient learning" (Confucian and non-Confucian) led in many respects to the ideological fruit of National Learning, and Hirata Shinto, and to a cultural "revolution," especially among the merchants. In an ironic twist of fate, the merchant city of Kyoto, which was "defrocked" of its political preeminence, gained its "revenge," so to speak, by becoming the philosophical centre for the popular ethics movement that eventually would undermine the ideological foundations of Tokugawan power in the Edo era. This ideologically driven social movement would ultimately give birth to the Meiji era when Japan re-emerged onto the world stage, but this time as a lasting political force.

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I. Introduction

By the end of the Edo period of Japan (1603–1868), the three major religious traditions of Japan each appear to have found formally defined roles within Japanese culture and politics. In the mid-19th century, N. Sontoku (1787–1858) succinctly summarized his understanding of their more formalized roles as follows: "Shinto is the way, which provides the foundation of the country; Confucianism is the way which provides for governing the country; and Buddhism is the way which provides for governing one's mind."[1]

The Edo period, however, does not just evidence a formalization of societal roles for religious traditions. It also includes a strong move back to the ancient ways of "primordial" Japanese society that existed before the politicization of Shinto, and the importation, first, of Buddhism, and then, of Confucianism. This religious move "back to the future," so to speak, is first evident in a return to Confucian "ancient learning" and then to Japano-centric "native"/ National Learning. Both of these moves fostered the development of popular ethics among commoners, which ultimately undermined the strong centralization of socio-political power in the hands of the Tokugawa elite. Popular ethics/culture entailed the ability of commoners to participate in, and create, cultural activities such as books, paintings and woodblock prints (ukiyo-e), the theater (kabuki, bunraku), and the "pleasure quarters" (tea houses, brothels). It is my purpose in this essay to trace the rise of, and motivation behind, this popular ethics movement, specifically within the context of the religio-political agenda of the Tokugawa shogunate. In attempting to chronicle the rise of popular ethics, I will first investigate the roots of these religious developments in the first century of the Edo period (1600's) and then, second, to explore their fruits, which challenged the formalization of Japanese society under Tokugawan rule.

II. Roots: The 17th Century Sociological Context

The roots of the popular ethics movement are already found in the first century (1600's) of the Edo period, a period which saw dramatic political, religious, cultural, philosophical, and economic developments. In 1603, Ieyasu, the first Tokugawan shogun, centralized political control in Japan away from the imperial city of Kyoto to his new capital of Edo (modern day Tokyo). In a fitting twist of fate, one might say that Kyoto, in turn, got its "revenge" when it became the "capital" of ideological change in its role as host city for many of the key scholars behind the rise of popular, rather than Neo-Confucian, ethics. One might even be able to go so far as to say that "the pen of Kyoto ended up being mightier than the sword of Edo." How did the penmanship of Kyoto's ideologues blunt the tip of the Tokugawan sword in Japan's new Edo period? To answer that question, it is helpful first to understand the key strategy used by the Tokugawan regime in the wielding of its politico-military sword.

A key Tokugawan strategy for the establishment, and then maintenance, of power involved the leveraging of religious traditions for socio-political ends. Thus, this strategy not only lent ideological legitimacy to the new centralized military/political regime, but it also facilitated a fusion of Japanese religious, cultural, and even economic elements in

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[1] Michiko Yusa, *Japanese Religious Traditions* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall Inc., 2002), 85. Governance of the mind through Buddhism is focused on deliverance from desires, which is the third of the fourfold truths.

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concord with that new political reality.[2] This centralization of government curtailed the "expansive spirit of the preceding era…as the shogunate adopted strict measures to control all aspects of people's lives and institutions."[3] The Tokugawa military government appears, in many ways, to have adopted as their social philosophy the four-fold social stratification in the Neo-Confucian tradition as it was espoused by Zhu Xi (also spelled Chu Hsi; 1130–1200 CE)[4] and then as adapted by Hayashi Razan (1583–1657).[5] The Neo-Confucian four class system was, in descending hierarchical order, the samurai class, the peasants/agriculturalists, the artisans, and the merchants.

So as better to understand the Tokugawa inspired fusion of politics and religions in the first century of the Edo period, it is perhaps helpful to set the sociological context within which this religio-political shift took place. Two primary benefits ensued from the shogunate's alignment with an ancient philosophical tradition, particularly Neo-Confucianism. First, it formalized, and thus re-affirmed, a four-class system that maintained in perpetuity the elevation of the samurai class to power and prestige. Second, a religious justification for political power more effectively gained the loyalty of masses, and thus created checks and balances for societal expressions that differed from the "party line," so to speak. At least four areas of change were managed more effectively than in neighbouring countries through the Tokugawan fusion of religion and politics: population growth, social unrest, cultural diversity, and economic prosperity.

Unlike in China, one of the hallmarks of Tokugawan ingenuity was the way in which their population growth was managed in sustainable ways.[6] Strong centralized government appears to have contributed to this success. Documentary evidence from annual Buddhist temple registers[7] shows that "population growth was consciously curtailed using a wide variety of methods: late marriages, restrictions on length of childbearing of women, abortion, infanticide, and the like."[8]

Although, not unlike Europe, social unrest was also characteristic of the Edo period (at least 6889 disturbances were recorded[9]), somehow the Tokugawa shogunate managed to avoid wide-scale insurrection that would have toppled either rural administration or the central government. Hall comments, albeit anachronistically, that a "Marxist-style" model is foreign to the Japanese experience since "the Japanese narrative is concerned with the formation of class identity within an acknowledged national historical frame."[10] In other words, Japanese peasants were not generally interested in an uprising that would topple government, but rather were more interested in raising their socio-economic status through cooperative engagement with the existing government.[11] This approach to identity formation was facilitated through the political appropriation of historical and religious traditions that affirmed the centralized political regime as socially legitimate (through Neo-Confucian moral philosophy) and even divinely sanctioned (Ieyasu's deification as a living *kami*, an avatar of the Yakushi Buddha[12]).

[2] Herman Ooms writes that "Military power, the naked instrument of domination, was transubstantiated through association with the sacred into political authority of a religious character" (*Tokugawa Ideology: Early Constructs, 1570–1680* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985], 61.)

[3] Ooms, *Tokugawa Ideology*, 78. The new Tokugawa socio-political reality, the *bakuhan*, (a term that combines *bakufu* with *han*) spread its control over the previous feudal states by, among other things: (1) a new code of law which prescribed issues related to private conduct, marriage, types of weapons, size of armies; (2) limited contact with foreigners through tight trade restrictions; (3) the proscription of Christianity, particularly Roman Catholicism; and (4) maintained power over the imperial household, the daimyo, and religious authorities.

[4] "As a term Neo-Confucianism has a variety of nuances but most scholars who use the term do so in reference to forms of Confucian philosophizing that emerged in the wake of Buddhism…As Buddhist estimations of reality gained a greater hearing, Confucians formulated a metaphysics affirming the reality of the world of experience, explaining the substantial nature of the world by way of the notion of *ki*…In positing this metaphysics of *ki* along with various other ideas related to ethics, politics, spirituality, and humanity, Confucian scholars expanded upon the basics of early Confucian thinking so much so that many modern interpreters have referred to them as 'Neo-Confucians.'" http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/japanese-confucian/ (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy); accessed Sept. 30, 2022.

[5] Robert Morrell clarifies that it was "Hayashi Razan's [1583–1657] version of Chu Hsi's Neo-Confucianism…that the Tokugawa military government officially supported as its social philosophy" ("Literature and Scripture" in *Nanzan Guide to Japanese Religions* [Paul L. Swanson and Clark Chilson, eds.; Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006], 257–73, esp. 266]. Yusa (*Japanese Religious* Traditions, 84) states that Razan's support of Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism was mainly politically motivated as a way to counter his political adversaries who were of a Buddhist persuasion (i.e., the Buddhist priest, Tenkai [1536–1643] and Suden [1569–1633]), who were Ieyasu's close advisors.

[6] John Whitney Hall comments that "it is thought that both the population and size of the land base probably doubled within the first century of Tokugawa rule. The remarkable fact is that the overall population appears to have remained at roughly the same man–land ratio throughout the Edo period" ("Introduction" in *The Cambridge History of Japan*, vol. 4 [J. W. Hall, ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991], 1–39, esp. 24.

[7] Buddhist temple registers were initially created for the purpose of screening out Christian believers after the Tokugawan proscription of Christianity in 1640.

[8] Hall, "Introduction," 24. But Hall also notes another factor that came into play: "There are also those who believe that the failure of the population to grow was due primarily to the ill effects of the feudal system" (Ibid., 24).

[9] Hall, "Introduction," 25.

[10] Hall, "Introduction," 25.

[11] This is not to say that there were not large-scale peasant uprisings, that even required the intervention of government soldiers, but Hall suggests that many are thought simply to have been expressions of "union collective bargaining" (Hall, "Introduction," 25).

[12] Ieyasu died in 1616. The shogunate had him deified and worshiped as a living *kami* just as his great rival, Hideyoshi, had been. A Tendai priest, Tenkai, who had been one of Ieyasu's advisor's on religious and political matters insisted on giving Ieyasu the posthumous title of

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While large-scale political revolution was averted, a cultural "revolution" unfolded beginning with the 1600's, in which not just the upper classes but now also commoners could participate in, and create, cultural activities, such as theatre going, painting, and gardening. Matsunosuke notes that "the strength of Edo-period culture is not to be found in extant artifacts of the era. Rather, its strength lies chiefly in its spectacular breadth and diversity. This was a period of unprecedented cultural prosperity."[13]

III. Roots: 17th Century Politics and Neo-Confucianism

Cultural development of this magnitude belies an underlying stability throughout a country in which the political, social, and economic segments of society have not only found their own strength and stability but have also found a mutual interdependence that unites the peoples and thus creates an environment in which law and order create safety and predictability that fosters cultural and economic growth. Neo-Confucian learning appears to have provided the philosophical roots from which these variegated societal fruits grew. It is important to understand not just its application within Tokugawan society but especially its ideological basis. It is this ideological basis that would come under attack from a variety of directions as the learning of the ancients became more accepted by scholars outside of the Neo-Confucian "universe," many of whom were located in Kyoto.

Even before the Edo period, warlords and high ranking samurai were attracted to Sung Neo-Confucianism, especially to the teachings of Zhu Xi.[14] Scholarship traditionally acknowledges that Zhu Xi's teachings were transformed into important religious, political and ethical forces during the Tokugawa shogunate.[15] Ooms agrees to a point, but he problematizes the scholarly conception that "Neo-Confucianism monopolized this discourse, and…[that] its relationship to the Tokugawa power structure transformed it into an official orthodoxy."[16] He cites as evidence the fact that "Ieyasu and the next three shoguns…gave no distinctive institutional support to Neo-Confucianism."[17] Ooms does concede, nonetheless, that "a considerable Neo-Confucian vocabulary was employed to talk and think about man and society."[18] Ooms counterbalances this Neo-Confucian influence, though, with his observation that Shinto did more than Confucianism for the political ideology of the divine right of the emperor by virtue of the concept of a living *kami*.[19]

a) Chinese vs. Japanese Neo-Confucian Ideology

The Japanese appropriation of Zhu Xi's philosophy, however, was more overtly focused towards socio-political ends than was the case with their Chinese counterparts. Chinese Neo-Confucians focused upon the transformation of individual selfish nature (*qi*) into the pure, or original, human nature (*li*) that was in harmony with the cosmic principle of the highest moral good. Zhu

"Daigongen" (great incarnation of the Buddha essence). Cf. further, Willem Boot, "Ieyasu and the Founding of the Tokugawa Shogunate" in *Sources of Japanese Tradition: 1600 –2000*, Vol. 2 (2nd ed.; Wm. Theodore de Bary, Carol Gluck, and Arthur E. Tiedemann, eds.; New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 7–32, esp. 11.

[13] Nishiyama Matsunosuke, *Edo Culture: Daily Life and Diversions in Urban Japan, 1600–1868* (Gerald Groemer, trans.; Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 8, 9. Matsunosuke summarizes some of the cultural exploits of the populace: "Even the general public took part in leisure pursuits and played an active role in the creation of new cultural forms. The average commoner read books or visited the theater; some even wrote haiku verse and *senryu* (seventeen-syllable comic verse) or performed musical genres such as *gidayu, kato bushi, shinnai, or nagauta.* Others went on pilgrimages sponsored by religious associations (*ko*) and toured distant places…clothing and housing too showed marked improvement...never before had there been such an extraordinary variety of hand-made cultural artifacts in Japan…people in every corner of the land were busy manufacturing local specialities…by the late Edo period this activity had stimulated an unprecedented development of the transportation network…indeed, the construction of footpaths during the late Edo period can be seen as a kind of symbol of this golden age of handicraft culture" (Ibid., 9).

[14] Tokugawa rulers who appear to have taken Neo-Confucian scholars into their service include Ieyasu (1542–1616; shogun 1603–1605), Iemitsu (shogun 1623–1651) financed a school for Hayashi Razan (1583–1657) to spread his teachings. The fact that there existed an official ideology is seen in the punishment of Kumazawa Banzan (1619–1691), and Yamaga Sokō for "unorthodox" views. Tsunayoshi (shogun, 1680–1709) was a frequent lecturer on Neo-Confucianism.

[15] Herman Ooms says the "broadly speaking there is no denying that 17th century Japan is witness to a well-developed political discourse that is absent in the previous century" ("Neo-Confucianism and the Formation of Early Tokugawa Ideology: Contours of a Problem," in *Confucianism and Tokugawa Culture* [Peter Nosco, ed.; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984], 27–61, esp. 30).

[16] Ooms, "Neo-Confucianism," 30. Ooms identifies five points that scholarship has "uncritically woven into standard treatments" of the 'official' linkage between bakufu, Neo-Confucianism and ideology. These five strands are: (1) a linkage between the bakufu, Neo-Confucianism, and ideology; (2) this linkage is seen as an event that took place between three primary individuals—Ieyasu, Seika, Razan; (3) this event is portrayed as a conscious decision by Ieyasu to unite politics with a national ideology; (4) it is implied that only a single body of thought, Neo-Confucianism, was comprehensively appropriated; and (5) the shift from Buddhism to Neo-Confucianism is presented as a substitution of secular, rational thought for religious doctrine, and structured as a phenomenon of historical discontinuity" (Ibid., 29). All five strands stem from the writings of Hayashi Razan himself, which writings are doubtlessly self-serving. In this regard, Ooms notes that Andō Shōeki (1703–1762) "an articulate and critical thinker, exposed all ideologies (Neo-Confucianism in particular) as ploys to rob the peasants, and accused Hayashi Razan of having contributed to this deception" (Ibid., 57). Ooms quotes Shōeki's critique of ideology in his book *Tokugawa Ideology:Early Constructs, 1570–1680* (p. 296): "The Way of Sages functioned to make excuses for thieves…including Hayashi Razan…violated the Way of Heaven by robbing the common people." Ooms suggests further that "Shōeki's views, like those of Razan (or any other writer) are partial views, but the time has come to look at Tokugawa ideology through Shōeki's eyes rather than Razan's. Shōeki's views are more to the point" (Ibid., 296).

[17] Ooms, "Neo-Confucianism," 33.

[18] Ooms, "Neo-Confucianism," 30.

[19] Ooms, *Tokugawa Ideology*, 73.

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Xi established a kind of rationalist philosophy which adopted the principle espoused by Ch'eng I that "the Supreme Ultimate is the principle of all things in Heaven and Earth."[20] This "Supreme Ultimate" is the *li* (Principle) behind the *qi* (Ether) of *yin* and *yang* and the five elements (fire, water, wood, metal and earth). In this regard, then it is the ultimate source that transcends, and undergirds, everything else not just in heaven and earth, but even Heaven and Earth itself.[21]

All things are said to consist both of metaphysical Principle and physical Ether. Principle determines the nature of a thing and Ether its form. Thus, since all things descend from the Supreme Ultimate, all things by nature are equal. But, in terms of physicality, there is a hierarchy of form, not just in the physical realm (e.g., humans are endowed with the highest Ether) but also in the social realm (i.e., a fourfold stratification of society). It becomes obvious then that Zhu Xi's concept of a hierarchy of class divisions was not presented as a social construct but rather as a cosmic category.[22] In other words, it was the different material forces of Ether[23] that resulted in differing individuals being born into one of the four classes. Class division was not simply an *a posteriori* social category, but rather an *a priori* metaphysical category.

Chinese Neo-Confucians focused on the individual's attainment of freedom from human desires and one's concomitant unification with the Principle of heaven. This was said to be achievable through subjective (moral cultivation) and objective (intellectual investigation) approaches.[24] Maruyama highlights how in Zhu Xi's Confucian universe "this individual moral effort is an absolute precondition for the realization of all political and social values."[25] In other words, personal change is the basis for all societal change. Yusa notes that Japanese Neo-Confucians, by contrast, minimized the individualistic dimension of Confucian thought and instead prioritized the utilitarian benefits of Zhu Xi's division of society into a descending hierarchy of four basic classes (i.e., samurai, peasants, artisans, and merchants).

b) Anti-Buddhism and the Rise of Tokugawan Neo-Confucianism

It was not just political utility nor purely philosophical reasons, however, that fostered "official" interest in Neo-Confucianism. A rising tide of anti-Buddhist feeling by the mid-17th century provided additional motivation. Yusa notes that among political circles "the Lords of Okayama, Aizu, and Mito provinces all embraced Confucianism in their dislike of Buddhism."[26]

But anti-Buddhist sentiment was evident even on the level of the common populace, specifically with respect to the perceived abuses of the Danka system. In 1614 Tokugawa Ieyasu established the Danka (patron) system, two years after he banned Christianity.[27] It forced every family unit to register with a Buddhist temple as a way of proving that they were not Christian.[28] This turned Buddhist temples into formally established institutions.

In 1660 the Danka system had not only become an official registry associated with Buddhist temples, but now the registered family units also had to take on the burden of financial support of the priests's living expenses and for the repair, upkeep, and construction of the temples. Additionally, families were required to attend temple ceremonies, especially the annual festival honoring the founder of the temple. Visits to ancestral graves were obligatory for the spring and fall equinox and for the midsummer *bon* when it was thought that the living could reunite with the dead ancestors. By 1700, temples obliged family groups to erect gravestones, which expanded the land holdings of the temples. In this time Buddhism became a funeral religion centred on memorial services for the ancestors.[29]

[20] Masao Maruyama, *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan* (Trans. Mikiso Hane; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 21.

[21] Maruyama notes that "because in Chu Hsi's philosophy Principle is inherent in all individual things and yet transcends them all, retaining its monistic character, Chu His philosophy has been interpreted variously as monistic (based on Principle alone), dualistic (based on Principle and Ether), or pluralistic" (*Studies in the Intellectual History*, 22).

[22] Statements such as these reflected widely held beliefs: "samurai are superior to the common people; it thus natural that the samurai rule." And " peasants produce the five grains and as such they are the basis of the country; artisans create tools; the merchants just exchange with others produce in order to gain profit, therefore they are of the lowest class" (Yusa, *Japanese Religious Traditions*, 83).

[23] Yusa, *Japanese Religious Traditions*, 83. Yusa (p. 83) notes further that "Zhu Xi taught that this principle (*li* in Chinese, *ri* in Japanese) is activated by the material force (*qi* in Chinese, *ki* in Japanese) in each individual."

[24] Maruyama, *Studies in the Intellectual History*, 24. The ultimate goal is to become a sage, which occurs when "if by 'preserving the heart' and 'investigating the Principle' and by using the subjective and objective methods, he succeeds internally in eliminating all human desires and returning to his Original Nature, and externally, in fusing with the law of the world" (Ibid., 25).

[25] Maruyama, *Studies in the Intellectual History*, 25.

[26] Yusa, *Japanese Religious Traditions*, 83.

[27] Shogunate officials were "concerned about two things: one was the fear of Western countries taking over Japan, and the other was that Japanese Christians might unite themselves across the social classes and so become a social force that would challenge the foundation of the new shogunate" (Yusa, *Japanese Religious Traditions*, 78).

[28] "During the Edo period for a family not to observe these rituals raised the authorities' suspicions that members of the family might be crypto-Christian or followers of the forbidden Nichiren sub-sect of *Fujufuse*" (Yusa, *Japanese Religious Traditions*, 82).

[29] By 1700, due to the Danka system, "Buddhist priests thus found themselves the caretakers of the dead" (Yusa, *Japanese Religious Traditions*, 82). As a funeral religion, Buddhism eventually instituted 13 different commemorative rituals for the dead, each of which was conducted by a Buddhist priest. These thirteen rituals were observed on the 7th, 27th, 37th, 47th, 57th, 67th, 79th, and 100th days after death along with the 1st, 3rd, 7th, 13th, and 33rd anniversaries.

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But the financial security of the Danka system was not without its abuses by the temple establishments, so much so that in 1665 the government had to issue an edict to curtail the luxurious lifestyles enjoyed by many Buddhist priests.[30] Some feudal lords who were opposed to Buddhist temples took advantage of this regulation to close down non-compliant temples.

IV. Roots: The Rise of Popular Ethics

By looking back to the ancients of China (Confucius and Mencius)[31] and of Japan (ancient Shinto), before the rise of Neo-Confucianism, three scholars in particular, Yamazaki Ansai, Itō Jinsai and Ogyū Sorai, helped to loosen the socio-political grip of the Tokugawan shogunate over the commoners. Their schools helped to undermine the philosophical foundation of Japanese Neo-Confucianism from two different directions. Ansai explored the commonalities between ancient Confucianism and ancient Shintoism. Itō and Sorai, however, stayed solely within the bounds of Confucian enquiry. While not questioning the metaphysical reality of the Confucian principle of the Supreme Absolute, they relativized the resultant ethical constraints upon human society. Their approach came to be known as "ancient learning" (*Kogaku*). In this worldview anyone could become a sage or could intellectually explore and passionately participate in the arts simply for their own sake and not for any necessary communal, societal, or ethical benefit. Art was no longer a utilitarian pursuit for socio-political gain but could be pursued simply for private pleasure. Popular ethics eventually grew out of, and reinforced, this philosophical challenge to Neo-Confucian hegemony.

The socio-political impact of popular ethics was felt in Edo period Japan among the three social classes that *a priori* had previously been assigned an inferior status compared to the ruling samurai class. Merchants and peasants/agriculturalists, in particular, saw a burgeoning freedom beyond their previously constrictive social boundaries. A strong Japano-centric ethnicity and culture developed out of the lineage of "ancient learning" (*Kogaku*) which later came to be known as "native"/National Learning (*Kokugako*). Interestingly, rather than promulgating an even greater socio-political isolation from the world, National Learning appears to have provided sufficient national identity and pride for Japan to emerge successfully onto the world stage at the dawning of the new Modern or Meiji period in 1868. The contribution of the three aforementioned scholars to the empowerment of commoners and to the establishment of National Learning bears further investigation.

a) Yamazaki Ansai (1618–82)

In my introduction I cited Sontoku's contention that, by the 19th century, Shinto was foundational to Japanese identity and Confucianism to Japanese politics. This does not, of course, exclude a recognition on his part that there was mutual interplay between the two for societal betterment. Yamazaki Ansai explored this mutual interplay two centuries earlier but primarily from the angle of their metaphysical commonality. His investigation, though, did not extend into a challenge of the Neo-Confucian idea of "existing social and political constructs [e.g., the four-fold stratification of society] as concrete expressions of abstract metaphysical norms."[32] This secularization of the socio-political world would be left to Sorai, almost fifty years later.

Scholarship does not technically place Ansai in the lineage of "ancient learning" since his concern was to promote ancient Shintoism rather than Confucianism. Ansai does, however, presage a focus on the learning of the ancients that would find its fuller expression in Confucian "ancient learning" and in its philosophical "cousin" Japano-centric National Learning, one of the expressions of popular ethics.

Ansai's primary agenda in his study of the ancients was to forge more formal ties between Confucianism and Shintoism. Ansai befriended Watarai Nobuyoshi (1615–90), a Shinto priest of the Ise Shrine, and Yoshikawa (or Kikkawa) Koretaru (1615–94), who headed the Yoshida Shrine in Kyoto. As a result he became convinced that the Principle (or the Way) of the (Neo-) Confucians was also present in pure Shinto. In Ansai's mind the Neo-Confucian emphasis on "'unswerving loyalty and selflessness, guarded by an ever-vigilant mind' was contained in Princess Yamato's prophecy: 'For the *kami* to come down you need first of all prayers; to receive blessing, you need straight forwardness, and if thus you gain the Great Way, the realm will prosper in peace.'"[33]

As such, in continuity with Zhu Xi, Ansai affirmed the value of studying the learning of the ancients simply for its own sake. In this way society would be indirectly bettered through the application of ancient insights to one's life in one's societal

[30] The governmental order was called, "Regulations for the Buddhist Sects and Temples" (*Shoshu jiin hatto*) (Yusa, *Japanese Religious Traditions*, 82).

[31] Mencius (371–289 BCE?) defended the teachings of Confucius (sixth to fifth century B.C.), especially that human nature is good. Mencius is regarded as the greatest Confucian thinker after Confucius himself. His teachings were very influential on the development of Confucian thought in the Song period. The *Mengzi* (*Mencius*) was included by Confucian thinkers of the early Song (960–1279), and Zhu Xi (1130–1200) as one of the Four Books. These became canonical texts of the Confucian tradition. (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mencius/ [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy]; accessed Sept. 1, 2019).

[32] Tetsuo Najita, "Method and Analysis in the Conceptual Portrayal of Tokugawa Intellectual History" in *Japanese Thought in the Tokugawa Period: 1600 –1868* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 3–38, esp. 9.

[33] Yusa, *Japanese Religious Traditions*, 84.

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engagements.[34] For his unifying efforts, Ansai was proclaimed a *Suika* by Koretaru (1671; *Sui* "to come down; prophecy"; *ka* "increase of divine blessings"). He was now revered as a living *kami*, and became head priest of his own sect, *Suika* Shinto which blended Shinto and Confucian teachings.[35] This school, which was based in Kyoto, provided one of the first sparks of Japano-centric teaching that would be fueled by "ancient learning" and more fully explored under the guise of National Learning.

b) Itō Jinsai (1627–1705)

Although also located in Kyoto, Itō Jinsai, the son of a merchant, did not study the ancients for the purpose of supporting Tokugawan Neo-Confucianism nor Shintoism. He developed the "hall to study ancient truthfulness" (the *Kogidō*). His school, in which over a thousand scholars from various social backgrounds and regions studied, was located across the Horikawa River from the school of Yamazaki Ansai. In contradistinction to Ansai, Itō incorporated poetry within philosophical enquiry since he valued the expression of human emotion (the Confucian "subjective" emphasis). Itō's approach is situated within the larger category of "ancient learning" called the *Kogaku* school which were led by Yamaga Sokō (1622–1685) and Ogyū Sorai (1666–1728).

In time Itō came to some fundamental disagreements with Neo-Confucianism. The Zhu Xi school worked with the assumption that human nature is inherently good. Itō disagreed and postulated instead that humans have the potential to become good. He envisioned that it was the practice of morality in daily life experiences that allowed one to realize the potential for goodness. Najita claims that "No thinker in Tokugawa intellectual history is more pivotal than Itō Jinsai in articulating a broad historicist philosophy that endorsed 'active life'—*sei-sei*—over the certitude of 'death'—*shi*. This historicist philosophy allowed commoners to conceptualize new relational 'engagements' in the fixed social order."[36]

These new relational engagements empowered merchants and other commoners to find ideological virtue in their daily work and lives. Itō disagreed with the Neo-Confucian view that moral value was intrinsically tied to a social hierarchy that is fixed by cosmology. He separated "moral action in the context of community from political action in the public realm."[37] As a result, he focused his scholarly attention upon the era prior to 221 BCE, that is, before the centralized social hierarchies of imperial dynasties. It was in that ancient universe that he tried to find articulations of universal human moral potential. His resultant historicist approach

> empowered 'engagement' with, rather than 'separation' from, social reality. Society itself was to be accepted as it is, as moral space, rather than the source of endless pain, suffering, and change…Itō's historicism does not point to antiquarianism but to active interaction in each particular, existential, historical reality, however humble in outward appearance, as the continuing universal moral present. History, in short, is transformed into an ongoing human field of moral potential.[38]

c) Ogyū Sorai (1666–1728)

Although Ansai's program met with some regional success, especially in Kyoto, it was the teaching of Ogyū Sorai, which built upon Itō's insights, that solidified the rise of popular ethics throughout Japan through a direct challenge to Tokugawan Neo-Confucianism. Sorai philosophically disconnected political and social realities from their metaphysical underpinnings. In his "discrimination" of the way, *Bendō*, Sorai argued for the utilitarian nature of ethics. He suggested that ethics were "not timeless norms but practical rules formulated in time to provide regularity and predictability to social existence."[39]

Philosophical differences aside, both Ansai and Sorai still subscribed to natural law as the basis for socio-political forms. This served to

> state succinctly the inevitability and justifiability of hierarchy, of structural arrangements as they have come to be at that particular juncture in history; the physical context within which the events of history occur; and the natural fate of one's social existence, of being locked into class at birth…the eighteenth century witnessed an unmistakable

[34] Ansai approvingly cites Zhu Xi's valuation of the sages of antiquity (in *Zoku Yamazaki Ansai zenshū*, vol. 3, pp. 1–5 Zhu Xi, *Wenji* 74:18a; WTdB): "I [Zhu] have observed that the sages and worthies of antiquity taught people to pursue learning with one intention only, to make students understand the meaning of moral principle through discussion so that they can cultivate their own persons and then extend it [moral principle] to others. The sages and worthies did not wish them merely to memorize texts or compose poetry and essays as a means of gaining fame or seeking office. Students today obviously do the contrary. All the methods that the sages and worthies used in teaching people are found in the classics. Dedicated scholars should by all means read them frequently, ponder them deeply, and then inquire into them and sift them." Cited by Mary Evelyn Tucker, "Kaibura Ekken" in *Sources of Japanese Tradition: 160 –2000*, Vol. 2 (2nd ed.; Wm. Theodore de Bary, Carol Gluck, and Arthur E. Tiedemann., eds.; New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) 254–67, esp. 254.

[35] Yusa, *Japanese Religious Traditions*, 84.

[36] Tetsuo Najita, *Visions of Virtue in Tokugawa Japan: The Kaitokudō Merchant Class in Osaka* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 26.

[37] Najita, *Visions of Virtue*, 65. Tsuchihashi followed on from Itō's historicism and drew upon Miwa Shissai in prioritizing moral purpose over against questions of administrative efficiency. Where the two competed, education of commoners became a more important value than simply maintaining a hierarchically based virtue system. Tsuchihashi "through the mediation of Miwa's idealism, [createad] a sharper and more coherent focus on the meaning of goodness. It is specifically to alleviate the suffering of commoners in concrete and charitable ways" (Ibid., 65).

[38] Najita, *Visions of Virtue*, 28.

[39] Najita, "Method and Analysis," 9.

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> rejection of that earlier faith…for example, the view that the samurai was an anachronism in light of economic change became a subject of grave concern, beginning with Ogyū Sorai and especially Dazai Shundai.[40]

Dazai (1680–1747; Edo), under the influence of Sorai, taught that Neo-Confucian dualism (Principle and Ether) was nothing more than a philosophical construct created for the purpose of maintaining the ideological hegemony of a handful of Sung philosophers. He saw little relevance for Neo-Confucianism in Japan's present circumstances. Najita summarizes Dazai's ideological program: "he viewed social and natural things primarily in materialistic terms, denying an innate ethical connection between men and things and emphasizing instead, on empirical grounds, the epistemological distinction between the natural order and the secular social realm of language and political events."[41]

Although both Sorai and Danzai challenged Neo-Confucian dualism from within the interpretive tradition of "ancient studies," Kaibara (Kaibura) Ekken (1630–1714) did so from outside that ideological tradition.[42] Both approaches served to facilitate the growth of variegated fruits within the movement that came to be identified as popular ethics.

V. Fruits of "Ancient Learning": 18th Century Popular Ethics

It was not just Ansai's attempts at doctrinal unity between Shinto and Confucianism, nor Sorai's (and Dazai's) separation of socio-politics from Confucian metaphysics that constituted a movement towards a recovery of the learning of the ancients. Along with economic prosperity in the 18th century came leisure time for commoners, especially among the merchant class. This leisure time facilitated a freeing of literature and art from ethical and political constraints. The merchant populace in Osaka and the imperial city of Kyoto were particular hotbeds for the development of popular ethics.[43] The confluence of philosophical influences in Kyoto through the teachings of Ansai, Itō and Sorai formed a "river of change" that would eventually culminate in a popular ethics movement nationwide that eroded the very foundations of Tokugawan socio-political hegemony.

a) *Fruit: Popular Ethics and the Merchant Class*

Class struggle is always grounded first in ideological struggle. Since in Neo-Confucianism the merchant class occupied the lowest rung of the socio-political hierarchy, the merchants in Kyoto had a particular affinity for socio-political change, and thus for philosophical "revolution." The rise of the merchant class provided the most basic challenge on both political and philosophical grounds to the samurai-class based, elitist Tokugawa hegemony. The return to ancient or pure Confucianism, and then to National Learning, by the merchant class not only challenged the Neo-Confucianism of the Tokugawa shogunate by providing a different model of governance, but also by affirming a new philosophical rationale that could elevate the merchant class from its minimalistic social status.

It comes as no surprise then that "ancient learning" (*Kogaku*) found such fertile soil in Kyoto, ninety-five percent of whose populace was comprised of merchants. The economically prosperous merchants of Kyoto turned their attention directly to the ancient teachings of Confucius and Mencius. Confucius's subjective emphasis on individual passion rather than only on the objective intellectual pursuits solely for societal betterment or for personal status reasserted "the central aim of Confucian 'learning for one's own sake' and the methodical, cumulative course of personal growth from elementary to higher learning."[44]

One can see how a popular ethic would have benefited merchants in particular on at least three fronts. First, personal integrity and ethics form the foundation upon which a lasting and vibrant business environment is built. Second, social and business engagements across societal stratifications become philosophically possible within a society built upon popular ethics. Third, societal power eventually accrues into the hands of those who control the economic purse-strings. But along with economic clout comes a natural desire to accrue social respectability and standing before the existing elite. "Ancient learning" lent credibility to the merchant class in affirming not only the value of commercial profit but especially of their value to Japanese society.

b) *Fruit: Popular Ethics and National/Native Learning (Kokugako)*

Kyoto does not only figure strongly in the development of "ancient learning" (the Confucian *Kogaku* of Itō and Sorai; 17th century), and in the popular ethics movement among the merchant class, but also in the formation of *Kokugako*, the anti-Confucian school of National Learning (18th century), also called "native"/National Learning.[45] While being influenced by

[40] Najita, "Method and Analysis," 20–21.
[41] Najita, "Method and Analysis," 12.
[42] Najita ("Method and Analysis," 13) summarizes Ekken's contribution: "we find from a Neo-Confucian stance a Kaibara Ekken rejecting dualism as an unreliable analytical tool. In his revealing 'record of grave doubts' (*Taigiroku*), Kaibara objected most to the argument that since men and things in nature are alike in their essence, principle in nature and in the universe must be ethical in the way men are. Kaibara' substitute formula was fundamental and provocative: nature was not ethical like men in society but men were governed by the same essences as nature, which was simply a natural 'principle'."
[43] For Osaka, see Najita, *Visions of Virtue*, 28. For Kyoto see, Yusa, *Japanese Religious Thought*, 84.
[44] Tucker, "Kaibura Ekken," 254.
[45] Yusa, *Japanese Religious Traditions*, 88.

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Confucianism, Shinto, and even Buddhism, Hane distills the essence of National Learning down to "an attempt to free Japanese learning from its excessive dependence on Chinese philosophy and literature."[46] The full intellectual impact of its influence, though, would not be felt until the Meiji era when it emerged as the philosophical foundation for the nationalistic intellectual movement.

Maruyama calls Motooria Norinaga (1730–1801) "the man who perfected National Learning."[47] He began his education in Kyoto under the Confucian scholar Hori [Kutsu] Keizan, whose teaching was similar in many ways to that of Sorai.[48] For example, both argued that *li* (Principle) was not an absolute *a priori* standard, but was derived from human enquiry and teaching. Yusa claims that Norinaga's philosophical lineage, and thus the start of the *Kokugaku* movement, however, can be traced back to Kada Azumaro (1669–1736), the head priest of the Fushimi Inari Shrine in Kyoto. Through an extensive study of classical Japanese literature, Azumaro decided that the study of ancient Japanese literature deserved its own scholarly tradition. Azumaro's disciple, Kamo Mabuchi (1697–1769), taught that the essential Japanese ethos 'masuraoburi' (masculinity, candor, and honesty) was distilled in the *Man'you-shu* (an eighth-century compilation of Japanese poetry). Mabuchi's disciple, Motoori Norinaga, took on the project of interpreting another ancient Japanese literary work, the *Records of Ancient Matters (Kojiki)*. This occupied him for the next thirty years. Through his study, he claimed to have found the original pure Japanese spirituality, free of Confucian and Buddhist influences.[49]

National Learning scholars tried to free Japanese spirituality of Confucian and Buddhist influences in both defensive and reactionary ways. Since both traditions used the "ancient learning" moniker, National Learning defended the autonomous nature of its discoveries through an expressed disavowal of any association with the Confucian school of "ancient learning" (e.g., Itō and Sorai). But scholars of National Learning also reacted directly against Confucian scholars. While some made Dazai Shundai "the object of particularly severe criticism," Norinaga did not directly attack Dazai or Sorai, but "it is clear that in his acid criticisms of the thinkers who worshipped China, he had the Sorai school primarily in mind."[50] This direct critique of Confucian teachings was continued by Norinaga's disciple, Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843), whose first scholarly foray, *Kamōsho* (Critique of a misguided work), was a rebuttal of Sorai's *Bendōsho*.

Norinaga's Japano-centric focus finds its genesis in Mabuchi's demythologization, so to speak, of the Chinese Confucian Way of the scholars. Mabuchi taught that "Man makes transitory institutions, but these must differ according to each country and each place…[Therefore] it is foolish to think that when institutions are once established they should be upheld by the people under heaven for ages to come."[51]

Norinaga took Mabuchi's insights one step further. Like Sorai, Norinaga "demoted" the sages from an otherworldly status to a simply political one. Thus, their Way was also reduced from a metaphysical category to an ideological construct for political control: "conquer the land of others, and prevent others from conquering one's own land."[52] While both Norinaga and Sorai saw the Way as an invention of the sages, for Sorai this fact is what made it absolute, while for Norinaga this same fact became his reason for rejecting the Way. Keizan's separation of poetry from ethics was also a key factor in the development of Norinaga's thought and in the growth of the popular ethics movement.[53] Art should be expressed for its own sake—subjective, passionate expression of the human condition without any necessary ethical or socio-political constraints or pragmatic purposes.

While this relativization of the Way freed the human spirit from socio-political constraints, it also freed the human intellect from the constraints of philosophical absolutism, a fact that worked against the success of National Learning in pre-modern Edo. Maruyama observes that since the "positivist and objective spirit [of National Learning] was inseparably linked to an apolitical outlook…its sad dilemma…[was that] it could not defend its right to survive in the new era by raising itself to the level of an exclusive political principle [as Confucianism had]."[54] The purity of National Learning's scholarly methodology limited its argumentation in two significant ways: negatively, to a rejection of the Chinese Way, and positively, to an acceptance of many political ideologies (e.g., "'Buddha and Confucius are also gods,

[46] Mikiso Hane, *Premodern Japan: A Historical Survey* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), 167.
[47] Masao Maruyama, *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan* (Mikiso Hane, trans.; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 144.
[48] Maruyama (*Studies in the Intellectual History*, 148) writes that "we should not overlook the fact that Norinaga spent the impressionable years of his youth under this teacher [Keizan]."
[49] Norinaga embraced the view that "the Japanese and their Shinto, when purged of all foreign accretions and influences, represented the pure, and therefore the best, inheritance of humanity from the divine ages" (Maruyama, *Studies in the Intellectual History*, 148).
[50] Maruyama, *Studies in the Intellectual History*, 145.
[51] Maruyama, *Studies in the Intellectual History*, 149, 150.
[52] Maruyama, *Studies in the Intellectual History*, 150.
[53] Norinaga writes that "in studying the Confucian classics, I follow more or less the Chu Hsi school, but where the interpretation of poetry is concerned, I find that Chu Hsi's commentaries fail to grasp the essence…Of course we consider poems that do not stem from evil intentions to be good, but among the three hundred verses in the *Book of Odes*, there are many poems which were the products of evil intentions…Regardless of good or bad intentions, *these poems are spontaneous expressions of the true sentiments of the composer*" (editor's emphasis) (Ibid., 148).
[54] Maruyama, *Studies in the Intellectual History*, 176.

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so their Ways are offshoots of the comprehensive Way of the Gods,' and 'things that cannot be regulated except by Confucianism should be regulated by Confucianism.'")[55]

c) *Fruit: Popular Ethics and Hirata Shinto and Christianity*

Nosco suggests that "if we credit Motoori Norinaga with having…given the reconstituted Shinto 'tradition' the authority of a sacred canon, it remained for Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843) to popularize Shinto nativism by asserting the singular supremacy of Japan, its culture, Way, and people."[56] Atsutane's program, known as Hirata Shintoism, took particular aim at the vestiges of Christian influence still left in Japan after Christianity's proscription in the early 1600's. He formulated a Shinto theology with a biblical interpretation. For example, Atsutane identified the first mentioned deity in the *Records of Ancient Matters* (Ame-no-minaka-nushi; "Master of the August Center of Heaven") with the Christian God, the Creator. He also used biblical terminology for popular ethics: good souls would ascend into heaven and bad souls would descend into eternal torment.[57]

But his interest was not in affirming the superiority of Christianity, but rather of Shintoism. Atsutane demonstrated correlations between biblical and Shinto theology as a way of providing further substantiation, and thus, pride of place, to the earlier, and thus, purer, Japanese spirituality.[58] In some ways, one might argue, this preemptive theological strike helped to prepare Japan for the Meiji period when eco-diplomatic contact with foreign powers, especially Christian European countries, resumed after its 250 year hiatus. Japan could now enter the world scene confidently with a robust national identity intact.

d) *Fruit: Popular Ethics about Women*

Women, however, did not fare as well as men in the religious foment of the Edo period. By the 17th century, and especially into the 18th century, the social and spiritual gains made for women through Kamakura Buddhism, especially with respect to gender equality regarding salvation, had all but receded.[59] It was the publication of the classic, "The Great Learning for Women" (1733, also called *Onna Daigaku*), that solidified the inferior status of women. Although generally its authorship is attributed to Kaibara Ekken (1630–1714), this has been questioned by some scholars[60] since its teaching contrasts with Ekken's *Yamato zokkun* in which the concepts of self-cultivation and self-development are affirmed for women.

In the *Onna Daigaku* "women are seen as having no life of their own, no individual character or personhood."[61] Japanese womanhood became identified with total self-subordination, both philosophically (the "dark" female *yin* principle is inferior to the manly *yang*) and socially (the needs of her husband and his family are tantamount). Yusa notes that a woman could be "returned" to the home of her parents if she was found guilty of any one of seven reasons that allowed for divorce by her husband's side of the family: disobedience to her in-laws, barrenness, lewdness, jealousy, and diseases such as leprosy.[62]

Nakae Toju (1608-48), though, was a dissenting voice with respect to the philosophical consensus on the inferiority of women. He believed his teaching would benefit women if they applied his principles of honesty, sympathy, obedience to their family settings. Toju prioritized the subjective and passionate element of Confucian teaching as being applicable to all human beings—men, women and children. As such, he argued that all humans possess a faculty akin to conscience (the "divine light of heaven"), which allows each to determine their own conduct. He taught that the highest virtue was filial piety. This teaching particularly appealed to the rising class of independent cultivators in Aizu.[63] But his political appeal was limited since he withdrew from feudal society to live what he taught by taking care of his mother.[64]

VI. Conclusion

It was my purpose in this essay to trace the rise of, and motivation behind, the popular ethics movement

[55] Maruyama, *Studies in the Intellectual History*, 176.

[56] Peter Nosco, "The National Learning Schools" in *Sources of Japanese Tradition: 1600 –2000*, Vol. 2 (2nd ed.; Wm. Theodore de Bary, Carol Gluck, and Arthur E. Tiedemann, eds.; New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 481–519, esp. 509.

[57] Yusa, *Japanese Religious Traditions*, 89.

[58] Atsutane reaffirmed the centrality of Japan as the birthplace of all the gods known in the world: "People all over the world refer to Japan as the Land of the Gods and call us the descendants of the gods…Japanese differ completely from and are superior to the peoples of China, India, Russia, Holland, Siam, Cambodia and all other countries of the world, and for us to have called our country the Land of the Gods was not mere vanity. It was the gods who formed all the lands of the world at the Creation, and these gods were, without exception, born in Japan. Japan is the homeland of the gods, and that is why we call it the Land of the Gods." Quoted from *Kōdō taii*, in *Hirata Atsutane zenshu*, vol. 1, pp. 22-23; RT. Cited in Nosco, "The National Learning Schools," 512.

[59] Yusa, *Japanese Religious Traditions*, 88.Yusa writes that "a salient example of this [i.e., a revival of misogynistic ideas in Buddhist practice] is the adoption of a Chinese apocryphal *sutra*, *Ketsubon-kyo* ("Blood Pond Hell Sutra), which was used by some Buddhist temples to advocate the view that women contaminated the soil and the water by the blood of childbirth and menstruation, and therefore they were destined to hell, unless proper rituals were performed by Buddhist priests."

[60] Tucker, "Kaibura Ekken," 261.

[61] Tucker, "Kaibura Ekken," 262.

[62] Yusa, *Japanese Religious Traditions*, 87.

[63] Barry Steben, "The Spread of Neo-Confucianism in Japan" in *Sources of Japanese Tradition: 1600 –2000*, Vol. 2 (2nd ed.; Wm. Theodore de Bary, Carol Gluck, and Arthur E. Tiedemann, eds.; New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 83–142, esp. 137.

[64] Steben, "The Spread of Neo-Confucianism," 123.

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within the religio-political context of the Tokugawa shogunate. In chronicling its rise I investigated the roots of the popular ethics movement in the first century of the Edo period (17th century) and its fruits in the ensuing centuries (18th and 19th centuries). The city of Kyoto, which was "defrocked" of its political preeminence, through an ironic twist of fate, gained its "revenge," so to speak, by becoming the philosophical centre for the popular ethics movement that eventually would undermine the ideological foundations of Tokugawan power in the Edo period. The subversive philosophical root of "ancient learning" (Confucian and non-Confucian) led in many respects to the ideological fruit of National Learning, and Hirata Shinto. Within this scholarly milieu, practical socio-political fruits also resulted, in particular the cultural "revolution," especially among merchants. This ideologically driven social movement would ultimately give birth to the Meiji era when Japan re-emerged onto the world stage, but this time as a lasting political force.

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