

The Concept of Learning in the Confucian Teaching of Itō Jinsai

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In the course of Japanese history Confucianism twice has tried to strike roots in the Japanese soil. The first attempt, in the Nara period, resulted in the establishment of the centralized monarchy and new principles of bureaucratic administration. The second, in the Tokugawa epoch, promoted the formation of a Confucian mode of discourse that shaped the contours of the Edo period intellectual life. Though Confucianism never gained the status of official ideology, its influence was by no means confined within the boundaries of the scholastic world. To understand the role played by Confucianism in Tokugawa society, it is worth pondering the ways it was used to encourage the emergence of a new type of man, one who occupied himself with the tasks of self-cultivation and self-perfection.

To this aim, we propose to examine the doctrine of one of the most acknowledged and famous Confucian scholars of the seventeenth century, Itō Jinsai (1627–1705), who alongside with Ogyū Sorai is credited with founding the Ancient Learning School. The study will be focused on his treatise *Dōjimon* 童子問 (Boy's Questions, 1673), written in the traditional genre of questions and answers and covering the fundamental problems of Confucianism. Compiled in the form of dialogs between the wise teacher *and* inquiring students, this text, in a concise and easy-to-comprehend fashion, introduced Jinsai's interpretation of Confucian ideas. Questions—189 of them—are grouped in a number of thematically united logical blocks covering various issues of Confucian doctrine.

As pronounced in the twelfth question of the first book (*maki*), the essence of Confucian learning is represented by three main themes—"human nature, the Way and learning." There is no doubt that this statement immediately reminds the opening paragraph of "Doctrine of the Mean," which states, "What Heaven has conferred is called the Nature; an accordance with this nature is called the Path of duty; the regulation of this path is called Instruction."¹ This formula expresses the essence of Confucian teaching as it was understood by the followers of Chu Hsi (1130–1200) line of Neo-Confucianism. Despite the fact that Jinsai is traditionally labeled as a Chu Hsi antagonist, in this case he shares the view of the Chinese philosopher on the fundamentals of Confucianism.

Then what are his views on human nature, the Way and instruction? How does he explain their relation? To begin with, the great importance of these concepts is clear from the fact that the scholar gives detailed explanation of these matters in ten

successive questions (first *maki*, N 12–22). Here are some questions voiced by his students: “What are the differences between human nature, the Way and instruction?” “Is human nature more important than instruction or is instruction more important?” “What constitutes the content of instruction?” “Why does the principal book in the universe—the *Analects*— touch upon instruction but does not speak about human nature, while *Mencius* concentrates mainly on the discussion of human nature?” “Is learning rooted in the human nature or does it exist outwardly?”

The enumeration of questions shows that they are centered on the main topic—the interrelation of nature, the Way, and instruction. The scholar explicitly clarified this crucial issue saying that “the human nature is good, thus people perceive the Way and yield to instruction like ‘the Way of the Earth cherishes the growing tree’” (“Doctrine of the Mean,” 17). In other words, he emphasized the idea that it was human nature that predetermined man’s susceptibility to instruction. This basic Confucian concept he illustrates with famous aphorisms of Confucius, such as “By nature men are nearly alike—by practice they get to be wide apart” (*Analects*, 17, 2) or “In teaching there should be no distinction of classes” (*Analects*, 15, 39).

This theme is very important for the scholar, as he again and again repeats that “if the human nature was stupid and stubborn like that of a dog or a hen, then even hundreds of Sages and wise would not be able to change to goodness the human nature with the help of instruction ” (1, 13). On the other hand, if there was excellent instruction, but human nature was evil and did not differ from that of a dog or a horse, it would run counter the Way.

Consequently, it is the inborn nature that makes possible the process of learning. This assertion puzzles his students, and raises a new problem: Does it mean that human nature is more important than the Way? Doubts concerning primacy of nature partly arose from the text of “Doctrine of the Mean” the first paragraph of which contains the definition of three concepts given in the consecutive order “Nature, Way, Instruction.” To this the philosopher argues that “nature exists as long as man exists, while the Way exists by itself irrespective of the human existence.” This final argument embraces a veiled criticism of Chu Hsi, who “erroneously” believed that human nature is a root and the Way is the summit.

If a man has an inherent ability to learn, what is the object of his study? This theme can be interpreted in two ways—in the broad sense, study means “perceiving the Way,” and in the narrow sense, it supposes a number of “subjects.” There is a separate question dedicated to the content of instruction. To answer it Jinsai resorts to the authority of Confucius citing his words: “There are four things which the Master taught—letters, ethics, devotion of soul and truthfulness” (*Analects*, 7, 25). It seems the saying needed further elucidation since the scholar launches long interpretation of the four things. He takes “letters” to be defined by the *Shih ching* (Book of Poetry), *Shu ching* (Book of History), and other books from the Six Classics. “Ethics, devotion

and truthfulness,” in the scholar’s opinion, mean practical realization of knowledge obtained from reading Classical books. Poor knowledge of classical books will result in one-sided knowledge, while knowledge without using it in practice will become “empty.” The next question dealt with the need to read books. One of the students inquired whether Buddha and the Ming scholar Wang Yang-ming (1472–1529), who believed that one should not rely on written sources, were mistaken. This was not just an ordinary inquiry; by implication, it referred to the polemical discourse between Chu Hsi and Lu Hsiang-shan (1139–1192) about the erudition and the state of mind.² The former insisted that learning should begin from receiving broad erudition by reading texts, while the latter thought that men at first should illuminate his mind and only then seek for vast knowledge. Jinsai’s answer, cited above, unequivocally shows that he upholds Chu Hsi’s position. In the next entry he openly refutes the opinion of Sung and Ming scholars that the most important task of a man is “to give full development to his own nature,” instead of it he continues the same quotation from *The Doctrine of the Mean*, which says that man can “assist the transforming and nourishing powers of heaven and earth” and “form a trinity with Heaven and Earth.”

To sum up, Jinsai underlines that three concepts—Human nature, the Way, and Instruction—form the kernel of Confucianism. If we look at this formula in the educational perspective, then we discover that it determines both the precondition of Instruction (human nature) and its object (the Way). As we have already mentioned, the main task of the education is the practical performance of the ethical norms defined by the Sages. In other words, the aim of the education is self-cultivation and attainment of the “noble men” ideal. There is nothing new in this idea, since the cardinal objective of Confucianism is the ethical transformation of human beings, enabling them to optimize their social roles in society. So it is no surprise that answering the question about the highest good in the Universe (3, 42), the philosopher unhesitatingly replies: “love for study.”

Now before we proceed to the interpretation of Jinsai’s teaching, let us analyze some of the categories used by the philosopher. Speaking about such topics as “education,” “instruction,” “learnt from the teacher, or book knowledge,” “the object of study” he uses the traditional terms 学 (Ch. *hsüeh*, Jp. *gaku* / *manabu*); 教 (Ch. *chiao*; Jp. *kyō* / *oshieru*), 學問 (Ch. *hsüehwen*, Jp. *gakumon*). The last term, *gakumon*, denoting the process of learning as well as its object, is used more often than the other two. According to Morohashi’s comprehensive Chinese-Japanese dictionary, this term is met in *Mencius* (chapter 3, part 2, 4) in the phrase “I have not given myself to the pursuit of learning, but I have found my pleasure in horsemanship and sword exercise” and in chapter 6 (part 1, 11, 4) in the statement “The great end of learning is nothing else but to seek for the lost mind.” In both cases the term means “the process of learning.” The same compound can be found in *Hsün Tzu*, in the chapter “Instructions for Learning, where it is written: “unless you hear the words of the ancient king,

you will not learn the greatness of the teaching.” Here the term does not stand for the process of learning; instead it designates the integrity of the doctrine. Therefore it is evident that semantically this term includes three related but not identical meanings—the process of learning (study); its result in the form of received knowledge (erudition or individual knowledge); and the object of learning understood as a whole body of Teaching (doctrine). To put it another way, the same term “*gakumon*” is used to denominate the process of learning, its object and its result like the English word Learning or Russian term “*znanie*” (knowledge) that can be used in the broad and narrow meanings. The interrelation between learning as doctrine and learning as erudition can be described as a relation between the whole and its part. Is it possible to apply the same pattern to the term *gakumon*?

First of all, it is necessary to mention that *gakumon* can be rendered by two compounds with the same first character “*gaku*”; in one case, the second character is 問 “*mon / tou*,” and in the other, the second character is 門 “*mon / kado*.” According to the dictionary *Kōjien*, both variants of writing are used to render the same meaning—“learning, process of learning, school.” No doubt, the second compound that originally meant “gates of a school” gradually started to be used as a denominator of a learning itself. The symbolic meaning of this word is evident, still it contains some less obvious subtext we would like to attract attention to. The symbol of “gates to knowledge” supposes the openness of knowledge for everyone—in the case of Jinsai, the idea that all human beings are capable of learning is voiced many times. What is interesting is the fact that in his treatise he does not once use the expression “to reach the gates of Learning.” Here the gates perform the function of dividing space, as do the gates in Buddhist or Shintoists temples where they separate the profane and sacral realms. To a certain degree as Gates to knowledge they play the same role as world of learning was created by the Sages (it is worth of mentioning that it is not without reason that Confucius repeated that he “passes on, but does not create”) and an ordinary man can only temporarily “visit” it. Thus Confucius himself can be symbolically treated as kind of a mediator that familiarizes people with the Sages’ wisdom.

Treating Gates of Learning as Temple gates brings to mind idiomatic expression “Temple of Science” used in many Indo-European languages. Though its origin and etymology remain unclear for us, it seems to be a universal metaphor known both in the eastern and western cultures. If we develop the analogy between temple gates and Gates of learning in the context of Japanese culture, then we probably can interpret the relation between sacral and profane realms as a polarity of outward-inner realms with the gates being a visible symbol of their border. To prove the idea let us once more return to the questions of Jinsai’s students. The twenty-second question in the first *maki* says: “Is learning inside the human nature or outside of it?” To this the scholar replies that outer and inner form an entity, with the help of inner one helps the outer, with the help of outer cherishes the inner, and they cannot exist without each

other. Then, he continues, “among the things necessary for life and learning there is nothing that was not borrowed from outer realm. To consider these things as “outer” is just the same as to pull up the tree from the ground or to take fish from the water.” In the epoch of the Sages there was no opposition of inner and outer, their separation and contraposition happened because of the narrow-mindedness of Confucians of the subsequent times.

This passage proves that despite philosopher’s negative reaction against application of inner-outer polarity to the “learning” problematic, it was one of the main epistemological instruments used in the Far Eastern area. It is precisely this fact that in my opinion can determine the specificity of the far-eastern concept of learning as doctrine and individual erudition. If we percept their relation as a whole and its part, the emphasis is placed more on their non-identity, while in frames of inner-outer polarity it accentuates the continuity of knowledge and there is no fatal break between the inner (erudition) and the outer (learning) at least in theory. Thus the idiom “Gates to Learning,” common to both European and Far Eastern cultures, and the use of the same word to denote simultaneously “learning” as a body of wisdom, educational process and erudition,” can in fact disguise two slightly different approaches to the concept of learning.

Now let us turn once more to the Confucian teaching in the interpretation of Itō Jinsai. According to him, one of the main ideas that formed the core of Confucian teaching and thus was especially emphasized by the scholar was the potential possibility (or better say, inborn availability) of education and the importance of instruction as a means of extensive self-cultivation. For this reason Jinsai goes into details dealing with wide range of topics related to the aim, object and methods of education. Let us ask ourselves why Jinsai, unlike his predecessors such as for example the patriarchs of Confucianism in Japan Fujiwara Seika and Hayashi Razan, was so fundamentally concerned with the concept of instruction (education).

At first sight it can be explained by the fact that he has made his choice in favor of “ancient Confucianism” voiced by Confucius and thus developed ideas of his Master who wanted with a help of his teaching to bring up a new type of man—so called “superior man” eager to bend every effort for the sake of public service. Then it is no surprise that one of his student’s inquiries contains affirmation that the *Analects*, in contrast to *Mencius*, is focused mainly on the problem of instruction. Now we face the new question: What were his grounds for rejecting Sung or Ming Confucianism in favor of its “original” ancient version?

Partly this choice was predetermined by the social changes that happened in the Tokugawa society. As the prominent Japanese scholar Bitō Masahide has showed, during the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries Japan was faced with “the appearance of new forms of state and social organization,” i.e., the establishment of *ie* (houses or lineages) as the basic unit of social organization among both the bushi (warrior

class) and the rest of population.”³ This process led to the fact that society no longer assumed that birth or social status was a prerequisite for making a living through cultural activity—the professional pursuit of such activities thus came to be regarded as a legitimate occupation, comparable to any other family enterprise. Consequently, regardless of one’s birth if one had scholarly or artistic talent, one could advance in one’s field and thereby establish a house of one’s own. This was true not only for bushi but also for those of townsmen or peasant origin. This new social reality to a certain degree explains the importance of “instruction” in the thinking of Itō Jinsai, himself the son of a craftsman who established his own school open for the people of different social statuses.

The openness of “learning,” the refusal to give deference to “secret traditions” that provided access to knowledge to the “privileged circle” of aristocrats, and the social recognition of intellectual activity as a professional occupation were Edo-period conditions that fostered the spread of Confucianism. Though the two basic aims of Confucianism were self-realization and setting the world in order, it was abundantly clear that the task of “ordering society” was the sovereign sphere of the Tokugawa rulers, who were not willing to share it with anyone. The authoritarian style of the first shoguns left no doubt that they only formally needed Confucian counselors who would assist them by dispensing wise advice. The more so as the example of Yamaga Sokō (1622–1685) exiled to Akō domain expressively demonstrated that bakufu won’t hesitate if it feels even a hint of threat against its power in the writings of Confucian scholars. Cases, when Confucian scholars like, for example, Ogyū Sorai wrote treatises on political matters by the official orders did not contradict the above-mentioned. Shoguns could ask for advice, but it did not mean they would follow it.

So, in the seventeenth century Confucian schools functioned as “private enterprisers” and were mainly concentrated in Kyoto or domains. The “official status of bakufu-sponsored school” of the Shōheikō, as H. Ooms convincingly showed, was no more than a myth deliberately created by the direct descendants of Razan, who administered that academy. It took until the middle of Tokugawa period for Edo to replace Kyoto as the creative center of culture.

As access to political field was restricted, there was only one realm of application where “self-realization” could have been attained—and that was the educational sphere. This situation was not regarded as tragic, since even Confucius himself had been unable to realize his capacities in political activity and instead concentrated on teaching. Most Tokugawa Confucianists had to follow his example.

Thus the wide spread of Confucianism in the epoch very powerfully influenced the educational sphere. It manifested itself in the appearance of a new category of people who chose intellectual activity as their main occupation and in the emergence of private schools and academies open for all students, regardless of their social standing.

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Gakumon became the main field in which the efforts of Confucian mentors were focused. They concerned themselves with matters of morality and ethics that were crucial not only for self-realization but also for everyday behavior. By no means does this mean that they gave no thought to issues related to the Way of governing or the Way of the sovereign, but these topics were not valued as problems of prime importance. The emphasis shifted to the molding of an ethical superior man who could attain the ideal of self-cultivation in the world of scholarship. For these reasons, *gakumon* became one of the basic concepts of Confucian teaching in the school of thought of Itō Jinsai.

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NOTES

1 Here and later all quotations from Chinese Classics will be given in James Legge's translation (Legge 1960).

2 See Tillman 1992, pp. 211–216; Martynov 2000, p. 215.

3 Bitō 1994, p. 373.