

# The Meaning of Heaven according to Nishi Amane

SAITŌ Takako

The starting point for this research stemmed from my examination of Nishi Amane's translated words from English to Japanese. I discovered that he used the Chinese character *ri* 理 repeatedly. The word *ri* is commonly translated "principle" in English. For instance, Nishi wrote that the word "philosophy" could be translated by *rigaku riron* 理學理論, which means the study of *ri* and the theory of *ri*. However he wrote that he chose the term *tetsugaku* 哲學 in order not to create confusion between European technical terms and Neo-Confucian technical terms.<sup>1</sup> Nishi translated the term "theology" as *shinrigaku* 神理學,<sup>2</sup> which means the study of the principle of deity. The term "ontology" was translated as *ritaigaku* 理體學,<sup>3</sup> which means the study of the principle of substance. Why did Nishi use this character *ri* so frequently?

\* The author expresses her gratitude to Helen Shall for translating this text from French into English.

1. 「生性發蘊」, 『西周全集』[Complete works of Nishi Amane, hereafter NAZ followed by volume number], (Tokyo: Munataka Shobō, 1961), I: 31.

2. NAZ I: 48 ; NAZ IV: III.

3. NAZ IV: I52.

This was the first question I faced in studying Nishi's works. I came to understand that Nishi used the word *ri* as a cornerstone to clarify European terminology and to translate it into Japanese. I have treated this question in a recently published article.<sup>4</sup>

During the research for that article I discovered the following, "Heaven means the place from which principles are formed."<sup>5</sup> It caught my attention and heightened my curiosity to know precisely what he meant by it. I therefore began my research for the present essay by delving into the meaning of this enigmatic phrase.

Nishi Amane 西周, who was born in 1829 and died in 1897, belongs to the generation of Japanese thinkers who lived through the latter half of the nineteenth century, experiencing firsthand what was undoubtedly the greatest upheaval that Japanese society has ever known.

My aim in this paper is to understand the meaning of Heaven (天 Jap. *ten*; Ch. *tian*), a term that had an absolute, spiritual meaning for Nishi. Much has been published about him in general, notably in Japanese, but work is limited on this particular question. Koizumi Takashi refers briefly to Nishi's belief in Heaven in a 1975 essay, but he does not carry through on his analysis of the notion.<sup>6</sup> Koizumi Takashi's seminal work, *Nishi Amane's Encounter with Western Thought*, published in 1989, recounts the main tenets of Nishi's thought and situates it in relation to Ogyū Sorai (荻生徂徠 1666–1728) and J. S. Mill (1806–1873).<sup>7</sup> Koizumi notes that Sorai exerted a significant influence on Nishi before the latter's discovery of Western thought. An article by Ōkubo Yasuharu published in 2004 compares Nishi Amane's religious thought with that of Nakamura Keiu (1832–1891). According to Ōkubo, Nishi tried to deepen traditional Confucian thinking about Heaven once the Meiji government in 1873 lifted the ban on Christianity and opened the door

4. SAITŌ Takako "La problématique du *ri* et la philosophie occidentale selon Nishi Amane," *Cipango* 13, (Paris: Publications Langues O', 2006), 78–100.

5. 天トハ理ノ由テ出ル所ヲ指ス者, 「教門論」 [On religions], NAZ 1,505.

6. KOIZUMI Takashi 小泉 仰, 「西周の宗教観」 [The religious perspective of Nishi Amane] 『明治思想家の宗教観』 [The religious perspective of Meiji thinkers], (Tokyo: Daizō Shuppan, 1975), 91–101.

7. KOIZUMI Takashi, 西周と欧米思想との出会い [Nishi Amane's encounter with Western thought], (Tokyo: Mitsumine Shobō, 1989), 332–4.

for him to develop his ideas on religion. Ōkubo underlines the influence on Nishi of a nineteenth-century Dutch philosopher, Cornelis Willem Opzoomer, particularly with regard to the question of the separation of religion and scientific study.<sup>8</sup>

In what follows I will examine Nishi's meaning of Heaven in relation to another idea he calls on, that of principal or law (理 Jap. *ri*, Ch. *li*), an idea that I have found to be essential to understanding his system of thought. I begin with the notion of "principal" in order to understand his use of the term Heaven.

As far as Nishi's life is concerned, there are various sources such as Koizumi Takashi and Thomas R. H. Havens.<sup>9</sup> It is enough here simply to note that up to the age of twenty-four, Nishi was educated in his fief of Tsuwano, which is situated in present-day Shimane prefecture, and was schooled in Confucianism, the official doctrine of the time. On arriving in Edo in 1854, at the very moment that Commodore Perry and his fleet were sailing into the capital's harbor, he started learning Dutch and English. A few years later, in 1862, the Edo government sent him to Leiden in the Netherlands, where he was to concentrate his studies on national and international law. After two years he returned to Japan where he held numerous high-ranking posts both in the political sphere and in the field of education. He worked in the Ministry for Military Affairs, gave lectures to the emperor, and was one of the founding members of the Tokyo Academy, established in 1879. His writing concerned a wide variety of areas: psychology, logic, morality, law, and politics. Nishi also translated three books into Japanese: one a collection of lecture by his teacher in Leiden, Simon Visseling, entitled 『萬國公法』 *International Public Law; Mental Philosophy, Including the Intellect, Sensibilities, and Will* by Joseph Haven under the title of 『心理學』 (1875 and 1876), and John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism* under the title 『利學』 (1877). He

8. ŌKUBO Yasuharu 大久保健晴, 「明治知識人における宗教論の諸相」 [Diverse aspects of religious arguments by intellectuals of the Meiji era], 『政治思想研究』 May 2004: 59–78.

9. For the life and works of Nishi Amane, see KOIZUMI Takashi, *op. cit.*; and Thomas R. H. HAVENS, *Nishi Amane and Modern Japanese Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970). Havens explores mainly the Westernizing tendency of Nishi's thought.

is considered in Japan to be the first translator of fundamental Western scientific terms such as “reason” (*risei* 理性), “idea” (*kannenn* 觀念), “subject” (*shutai* 主觀), “object” (*kyakkan* 客觀) and “philosophy” (*tetsugaku* 哲學). A significant proportion of this terminology is still used in contemporary Japan.

## NISHI AND THE CONFUCIAN TRADITION

According to the bibliographic notes recorded in his *Complete Works*, just before leaving for Edo in 1854, Nishi was nominated in his fief as a teacher of Confucian studies.<sup>10</sup> It is thus possible for us to conclude that he was educated in Confucian thought to the point that he was qualified to teach it. After discovering the Western sciences, however, Nishi harshly criticized this tradition and especially the Neo-Confucians of the Song dynasty, among them the Cheng brothers, Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085) and Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107), and Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200). His main criticism was that Confucianism never makes a clear distinction between politics and morality. He also rejected the idea that the laws of nature and the laws of morality belong to the same level of thought. For Nishi, this confusion, even if it was the work of the Four Sages<sup>11</sup> of the Confucian tradition, could no longer hold true after Western civilizations’s discovery of the laws of nature. Nishi added a further criticism by claiming that Confucianism, because of its veneration of antiquity, remains static and incapable of innovation. Nishi underlines the fact that mentalities change according to the age and according to place; they are different for different people and for different social positions. The clear implication is that it is no longer possible to practice a pure form of Confucianism.<sup>12</sup>

Nishi clearly wanted to go beyond the Confucianism of his early edu-

10. NAZ III: 133.

11. NAZ I: 287. Fuxi 伏羲, King Wen 文王 (founder of the Zhou dynasty), The Duke of Zhou 周公 and Confucius: these four characters, the first of whom remains mythical, are considered as Confucian models. According to legend, they wrote the text of the *Yijing* 易經.

12. NAZ I: 274–5, 278, 280.

cation, but it will become clear below why he was not able to shake it off completely. To go beyond this tradition, he focused on the distinction between two areas of study, the intellectual and the physical, giving more weight to the former than to the latter. At the same time, his morality was based on the notion of Heaven, in the ancient Chinese meaning of the term, which can be traced back even further than the beginnings of Confucian thought. In the Edo period a number of thinkers were interested in studying the ancient Chinese texts directly without being influenced by the texts of the Song scholars. Ogyū Sorai (1666–1728), who exerted a significant influence over Nishi, was one of them.<sup>13</sup> It therefore bears looking more closely at the common points he and Sorai shared in their understanding of the idea of Heaven.

#### RI AND INTELLECTUAL AND PHYSICAL STUDIES

The traditional way of looking at two areas of study, the intellectual and the physical, as if they belonged to the same level of reflection, was a major source of dissatisfaction for Nishi with the Confucianist tradition. After studying in Leiden, he labored to explain their differences and to separate them. Indeed, in Japan Nishi is considered the first thinker to have tried to distinguish between these two areas of study by drawing on schools of contemporary Western thought.<sup>14</sup>

In order to understand his reasoning, we may consider Nishi's class notes from around 1871.<sup>15</sup> In his lectures he uses the notion of *ri* to translate into Japanese the two English expressions “intellectual science” and “physical science.” Intellectual science is translated as “studies of the Principles of the heart” (*shinrijō no gaku* 心理上の學) and physical science as “studies of the Principles of physical things” (*butsurijō no gaku*

13. On this subject, see KOIZUMI Takashi, *op. cit.*, 3–29.

14. See ŌKUBO Toshiyasu 大久保利謙「解説」[Commentary], NAZ 4, 609. Ōkubo suggests as a possible source of the distinction between the two domains in question: Joseph Haven, *Mental Philosophy, Including the Intellect, Sensibilities, and Will* (1857), which Nishi himself translated into Japanese.

15. Nishi started giving classes on European scientific thought in Tokyo once the political situation made it possible.

物理上の學). Before examining these class notes, let us examine Nishi's definition of the term *ri*.

*Ri* was a key notion in the Neo-Confucian tradition of the Song dynasty, and more precisely in the School of Zhu Xi, which was the official doctrine during Nishi's intellectual training. For example, Cheng Yi claimed that "everything has its Principle." According to him, it was precisely this Principle that gave reality its normative base.<sup>16</sup> According to Zhu Xi, "getting to the root of the Principle of each thing" (窮理 Ch. *qiónglǐ*; Jap. *kyūri*) was the primordial attitude necessary for learning. This expression is used in his commentary on the opening sentence of *The Great Learning*. According to Zhu Xi, persons with this attitude would be able to expand their knowledge of things and arrive at genuine intentions that would lead to a pure heart, and would finally bring about great peace in the entire universe.<sup>17</sup>

In 1882 Nishi composed a few pages devoted to the notion of *ri*.<sup>18</sup> He begins with an etymological explanation in Chinese<sup>19</sup>—to work on jade to bring out its natural veins, and hence to put things in order—and from there goes on to cite passages from classical Chinese texts using this term. He notes that the Neo-Confucians of the Song dynasty were the first to use this term frequently, which was not much used before them. Next Nishi provides three Japanese words that he considers to be synonymous. The first is *kotowari* 事分り, knowing how to separate the whole circumstance into parts, and hence to understand a situation. The second is also pronounced *kotowari* 言分り and means knowing how to separate into parts what has been said, and hence to understand the spoken word. Now since the Chinese character *ri* can be read in Japanese as either *kotowari* or *ri*, we may conclude that Nishi is examining the

16. "Toute chose a son principe. Par exemple, ce qui fait que (*suoyi* 所以) le feu est chaud, que l'eau est froide, et même ce qui régit les rapports entre souverain et ministre, père et fils : ce sont là autant de principes." Translation from Anne Cheng, *Histoire de la pensée chinoise* (Paris: Seuil, Points Essais, 2002), 476.

17. The Zhu Xi text I have referred to is that found in「大学章句補伝」in『大学中庸』新釈漢文大系 2 (Tokyo: Meiji Shoin, 1967), 123–6.

18.「尚白笱記」NAZ I: 165–72.

19. Nishi relies on the『説文解字』NAZ I, 167.

meaning of the Chinese character *ri* by transcribing it in two different ways in order to highlight the idea of separation and understanding.

His third synonym is *hazu* 筈, which means the natural consequence of reasoning. He goes on to compare the term *ri* with a number of Western words. From the outset he notes the absence of an absolute equivalent, but then indicates the terms “reason,” “law of nature,” “principle” and “idea” in the Platonic sense. Concerning this latter he writes:

This term [idea] might seem unrelated to the character *ri*, but, in the end, it has a profound significance that seems almost identical to the definition of the Song Dynasty Neo-Confucians. It is necessary to examine this notion fully.<sup>20</sup>

Without developing the point further, he concludes:

We know one part of *ri*, but we can not know it in its entirety [...]. We can know that *ri* is that which is permanent and necessary, but there is no reason to know its entirety.<sup>21</sup>

What Nishi is doing here is trying to grasp the Western terms for “reason,” “principle,” “natural law,” and “idea” in a Platonic sense by assimilating them to the notion of *ri*. He also wanted to deepen his thinking on the relationship between the Platonic idea and the *ri* of the Song Dynasty Neo-Confucianism, but in the end was unable to do so. We may also note that the *ri* was defined by him as that which is *permanent and necessary*, and as such lies beyond the capacity of human beings to comprehend in its entirety. Taking this definition into account, we may render this term in English as Principle or Law.

Next we turn to a notebook in which Nishi underlines the importance of differentiating the two domains of learning, the physical and the intellectual or moral. He writes:

[In the West] Two types of study exist: *intellectual science* and *physical science*. In Europe, since ancient times, intellectual science was

20. 是は理の字と餘り關涉無き様に見ゆれと、深く宋儒の指す理と同一趣の理を徴する語と成れり、是猶下に委しく論す可し、NAZ I: 170.

21. 吾人固より理の一端を知れとも其全體を知る事能はざる事有り、[略]一定必然の者たりと云ふ一端は知れとも其全體は知るに由無き也、NAZ I: 171-2.

called *mental, moral, spiritual, or metaphysical* (a study that relates to that which is exterior to the Principles of things). [...] As the study of what is exterior to the Principles of things designates that which relates to the Principles of the heart, it is impossible to determine the limits of this domain. For example: fighting an enemy, evaluating his force or studying his weaponry comes under the Principle of things, while to reflect on strategy or the way to put it into effect concerns the Principles of the heart. [...] Even animals can know the Principles of things, but they do not know well what belongs to Principles of the heart. [...] In the West, nowadays, the Principles of things are largely exploited, and according to the doctrine of materialism, this is the sum total of study. And yet, such thinking is that of a person who has lost his point of reference and must not be followed. The absence of the study of the Principles of the heart leads to the abolition of the Way of Politeness.

學に intellectual (心理上ノ) science 及び physical (物理上ノ) science とて二ツあり、此の心理上の學は古來歐羅巴中定まりなく種々ありて mental なるあり、或は moral 或は spiritual 或は metaphysical (物理外の學) 等あり、[...] 凡そ物理外の學は即ち心理學なるか故に、此の學に於ては幾何なりと極りあるものにあらざるなり、[...] 譬えは今或敵ありて戦ひをなすに、其強さを論じ及び鉄砲器械等に就て論ずるは物理なり、其計策及び方略の如きは心理なるものなり、[...] 物理は禽獸の如きも能く知るものにして、心理に至りては能く知ること能はず、[...] 西洋近來に至りては物理大に開け、materialism の説に學は物理にありと云ふに至れり、然れども甚だ耽溺せし所の語にして強ち従ふべきにあらず、若し心理の學なきときは禮義の道も自から廢するに至るへし<sup>22</sup>

In this passage, as mentioned above, Nishi translates intellectual science as “a study according to the Principles of the heart,” and physical science as “a study according to the Principles of physical things.” This distinction between two spheres will be important for understanding his reasoning about the relationship between Principle and Heaven.

Secondly, we may note that Nishi thought that even animals—to be perfectly clear, Nishi uses a pejorative word (禽獸) for animals—could

22「百學連環」NAZ IV: 68. Translated by Saitō Takako and Helen Shall. The English words in the original text have been italicized in the translation.

know the Principles of physical things, but that they could not know a moral Principle. Only a human being is capable of this. And thirdly, Nishi is harshly critical of the rise in materialism in the West that could destroy “the Way of Politeness.” It is worth underscoring the fact that for Nishi it was obvious that “learning the Principles of the heart” is more valuable than the study of the physical and material world.

In order to better understand Nishi’s two expressions, “the Principle of physical things” and “the Principle of the heart,” we turn to a book published in 1874 (M. 7),<sup>23</sup> he develops his thinking on these two Principles. In a word, he states that the Principles of physical things are natural laws (*tennen* 天然, which means a “natural state, such as Heaven has created”). Not only the greater universe and the massive stars, but everything from the tiniest drop of water to the plants and animals to the human being are governed by this Principle. No human being, even a Son of Heaven (*Tenshi* 天子) can change it. Exorcisms cannot transform it. This Principle precedes the natural character of a man determined by Heaven at the time of his birth (*sententeki* 先天的, a neologism of Nishi’s age intended to translate the Western term *a priori*).

On the other hand, the Principles of the heart apply only to human beings, and only humans can contradict these Principles through unjust actions. These Principles are practicable in differing degrees, but they are not measurable. According to the occasion, the place, the individual, and one’s position, the Principles can change. For this reason, it is difficult to quantify them. The Principles of the heart are subsequent to Heaven’s determination of the character of an individual (*kōtenteki* 後天的, another neologism of the time to translate the term *a posteriori*).

We may note in passing that Nishi does not distinguish the plural from the singular form of the word Principle (*ri*) in his texts—and indeed, in Japanese, it is almost impossible to be precise on this question since the distinction is generally disregarded—but writes in the text cited above that the Principle of each physical thing is unique and valid for all persons, while the Principles of the heart are much more complex and very difficult to quantify.<sup>24</sup>

23. 「百一新論」NAZ I: 277–80.

24. *Ibid.*, NAZ I: 281.

In another text published later, in 1880 (M. 13), Nishi opposes and then reconciles these two types of Principles as distinct forces, both necessary for the development of a society. His reasoning is as follows: natural law is a Principle bestowed by Heaven on all beings. For the human person, the body (*nikutai* 肉體) is sustained by this Principle. If there were only this Principle, however, the strong would overpower the weak, the intelligent would lord it over the dim of wit, and the rich would control the poor. But Heaven also bestows tenderness on human beings (*aizen no jō* 藹然の情) that allows them to act according to Laws of the heart and to neutralize these situations. In a developed country—I assume that Nishi is thinking of the Netherlands, where he lived for two years—one can see the opposite: the weak seizing power from the strong, the dull from the brilliant, the poor from the rich. Nishi concludes:

Without annihilating the flow of the Principle by which the strong overwhelm the weak, the intelligent suppress the dull, the rich overcome the poor, it is also true that, while using the Principles of the heart which are dynamic factors, and while regulating the degree of annihilation, one controls the degree of neutralization. [...] The strong should not take power over the weak, but help them; the intelligent should not take power over the dull, but inform them; the rich should not take power over the poor, but help them. This is to obey Heaven's will; while using the two opposing forces, people manage to obtain a harmony in social relations. It is the law that enables them to achieve social well-being.

強能ク弱ヲ制シ、賢能ク愚ヲ制シ、富能ク貧ヲ制スル理ノ流行ヲ阻攔スルコトナク、更ニ心理ノ活機、之カカヲ減殺スルノ度ヲ節シ、之ヲ利用シテ以テ中和ノ度ヲ制シ、[略]強ハ弱ヲ制ス可ラス、之ヲ扶クヘシ、賢ハ愚ヲ制ス可ラス、之ヲ曉スヘシ、富ハ貧ヲ制ス可ラス、之ヲ調フヘシ、是乃チ、兩ヲ相反スルノ理勢ヲ利用シテ、以テ天意ニ奉答シ、依テ以テ斯民社交ノ和諧ヲ致シ、福祉ノ域ニ昇ラシムル所ノ例規ナリ<sup>25</sup>

We see here clearly that for Nishi, the Principles of the heart—a neutralizing force over natural laws—are necessary for a society to achieve a harmonious and beneficial state. Moreover, he thinks that the deliberate

25. 「人生三寶説」 chap. 7, NAZ I: 548.

use of these two forces complies with Heaven's will (天意 Jap. *ten'i*, Ch. *tianyi*).

## HEAVEN

We understand, then, the paramount value of the concept of Heaven in Nishi's thinking. I examine it through his text, 「教門論」 (On religion) 1–7 published in 1874 (M. 7) in *Meiroku zasshi* 『明六雜誌』, a review created in 1873 by Mori Arinori to stimulate discussion and promote the movement of Enlightenment. Nishi was one of its most active authors. Let us note in passing that, in 1873, the Meiji government revoked the prohibition of Christianity; this accounted for a certain number of authors treating religions in the 1874 issues. The text starts with the following sentences:

Religion is founded on belief (*shin* 信); it takes up roots in what is not possessed by knowledge. When one can know a thing, one has its Principle, however when one can neither possess nor know, one believes the unknowable only starting from the assumption whose foundation is what is known. Its Principle is thus not possessed [of the unknowable]. And so, the belief of common people who consider a tree, a stone, an insect or an animal like a divinity (*kami* 神), as well as the belief of scholars who believe in Heaven (*ten* 天), in Principle (*ri* 理) and in the Lord on High (*jōtei* 上帝), is belief without knowing. In spite of the divergence in these beliefs, the reasons are the same.

教門ハ信ニ因テ立ツ者ナリ, 信ハ知ノ及ハサル所ニ根サス者ナリ, 人既ニ之ヲ知レハ其理ヤ則チ己ノ有トナル, 然トモ得テ知ル能ハサレハ唯其知ル所推シテ以テ知ラサル所ヲ信スル耳, 故ニ其理タル亦己カ有ニ非ス, 然ラハ則チ匹夫匹婦ノ木石, 蟲獸ヲ神トシ信スルモ高明博識ノ天ヲ信シ, 理ヲ信シ上帝ヲ信スルモ, 皆知ラスシテ信スル者ナリ, 是差等アリト雖トモ其揆ハ則チ同一ナリ<sup>26</sup>

In this passage, we can find Nishi's position on the relation between knowledge and belief. He thinks that belief is possible beyond the limits

26. 「教門論」 NAZ I: 493.

of knowledge. Furthermore he considers the totality of “Heaven,” the “Principle” and the “Lord on High” to be objects of belief accessible to educated men; uneducated men have objects of belief such as a tree or a stone. I note that in another section of the text from which this quote comes, Nishi uses the adjectives “authentic, simple, and pure” to define an educated person’s object of belief, and the adjectives “gauche, coarse, vulgar, and disorderly” to describe the objects of belief of the uneducated.<sup>27</sup> We observe here an evolutionary vision of belief, however, Nishi stresses that any belief is based finally on what is beyond knowledge. For a source of inspiration, the “Lord on High” (上帝 Ch. *shang di*, Jap. *jōtei*) is an expression often employed, for example, in the Book of Poetry (詩經 Ch. *Shi jing*, Jap. *shikyō*, the popular airs and court odes composed around the tenth to the sixth century BCE and collected under the Zhou dynasties, from the eleventh century BCE to 256 AD), one of the canonical texts of Confucianism. In these poems, the “Lord on High” is regarded as the all powerful and personified divinity who expresses and imposes his will while bringing happiness to the virtuous earthly governors (Lords beneath), but natural disorder to the wicked.<sup>28</sup>

Consider the sixth chapter of “On Religion” where Nishi principally develops his thoughts on Heaven. This chapter is written in the form of question and response between two people, the author trying to convince his interlocutor.<sup>29</sup> We summarize here the broad outline of his argument following a thematic order.

First, on the choice of religion, Nishi says that one should never be forced either by popular habits, or by family tradition, or by the idea of recognition or social rewards. He declares that he will choose only that which his heart considers true or close to truth.<sup>30</sup> Then, he introduces the term *dokuchi* 獨知, “knowledge that only oneself knows,” which

27. 純情簡潔ノ誠信鄙粗猥雜.「教門論」, NAZ I, 500.

28. On the “Lord on High,” see『中国文化思想事典』[Dictionary of Chinese cultural thinking] (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 2002), 3 ; Anne CHENG, *Histoire de la pensée chinoise*, 54. See also Robert ENO, “T’ien as the King’s God,” *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 23–4.

29. 「教門論」chap. 6, NAZ I: 503–6.

30. 唯吾カ心ノ眞トシ眞ニ近ントスル者ヲ撰フヘシ. NAZ I: 503.

Nishi created to translate the English term “conscience.”<sup>31</sup> According to him, it is only this knowledge of oneself that enables one to judge if one’s actions are good or evil, something neither the feudal lord nor a father can do. It seems reasonable to suppose an influence of the Christian concept of conscience here. In any case, Nishi insists on *personal freedom in the choice of religion* as no longer the family’s obligation but as belonging to the individual. At the time, the idea was revolutionary, since from the beginning of the seventeenth century until 1867 the government of Tokugawa sought to ban Christianity by obliging each family to be affiliated with a Buddhist temple.

Second, as to what determines a person’s human nature (性 Jap. *sei*, Ch. *xing*), it is one of the essential notions of Confucianism that it is neither the feudal lord who nourishes a human being, nor the father who gave birth to one, that determines a person’s nature. It is Heaven that provides the human being with a body and with the human nature of heart/mind (心性 Jap. *shinsei*, Ch. *xin xing*). This is the “foundation of the human.”<sup>32</sup> No one is equal to Heaven.

I would add here that the phrase “humans were born from Heaven” comes from the *Book of Poetry*.<sup>33</sup> For Nishi, all persons share this gift of Heaven (the body and the nature of the heart). Here we see that he defines Heaven as *the foundation of the human by providing its body and heart*. Nishi does not employ the term “create” but instead uses “distribute or share” (*fusu* 賦ス). In this passage on the foundation of the human being, Nishi’s interlocutor initially uses the expression “complete naturalness” (自然ニ, read *jinenni* or *shizenni* in Japanese) to explain the fact that one has one’s own body and human nature—good or evil. Nishi asks him how, if each individual acts according to that person’s own natural disposition, one can judge the action of a criminal who has acted naturally. To convince his interlocutor, Nishi stresses that Heaven is the guarantor of universality in the criterion of good and evil, and that this criterion is given to all persons. In addition, Nishi explains that

31. See NAZ I: 631. The word *dokuchi* is not used in modern Japanese.

32. 汝ノ心性汝ノ形骸皆天賦ナラハ、汝ノ本ハ天ニ非スヤ、NAZ I: 505.

33. 天之生我(天の我を生ず)『詩経』[The Book of Poetry], 新釈漢文大系 2 (Tokyo: Meiji Shoin, 1997), 343.

*Heaven has its will* because it undertakes the action of distributing the body and human nature.

Thirdly, Nishi remarks on the question of knowledge and Heaven:

“Even if man can neither grasp nor know Heaven, Heaven is necessarily supreme; there can never be an equivalent.”

[The interlocutor said:] “Heaven is very close to the truth.”<sup>34</sup>

Nishi does not affirm that Heaven is the truth since truth refers to something that a human being is capable of knowing and Heaven is not knowable. He expressly uses the term *close to the truth*. We have already seen that Nishi sees belief as reaching beyond knowledge.

Fourth, Nishi specifies that *Heaven does not mean all of the celestial bodies, which are indeed “things” (mono 物)*. It is a remark that in effect refutes one of Zhu Xi’s three definitions of Heaven: Heaven as a physical sky, as a principle and as a Ruler.<sup>35</sup>

The fifth point relates to the relationship between Heaven and Principle (*ri*). Nishi does not accept the doctrine that Heaven is identical with Principle. According to him, this was a mistake made by Song dynasty Neo-Confucians in their interpretation of canonical Confucian texts, even though these doctrines were recognized by a number of his Japanese contemporaries.<sup>36</sup> Nishi stresses that *Heaven is not identical to the Principle* because:

Heaven means the place from which Principles are formed. So Heaven is not identical to Principle. Heaven is comparable to a king and Principles to his decrees. We couldn’t help but laugh if one called the decrees “king.”<sup>37</sup>

34. 所謂天ハ吾得テ之ヲ知ルナシト雖ドモ、必ス無上其偶アルヲ得サルナリ、曰ク稍眞ニ近キ者ナリ、NAZ I: 505.

35. For the meaning of Heaven according to Chinese thinking, see MIZOGUCHI Yūzō 溝口雄三「中国の天」[Chinese heaven], 『文学』(Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten) 1987, 12, 194–208 and 1988, 2, 96–112.

36. For example, YASUI Sokuken 安井息軒 wrote「天は則ち理のみ」[Heaven is nothing more than the Principle]. See ŌKUBO. *op. cit.*, 60.

37. 天トハ理ノ由テ出ル所ヲ指ス者ニシテ、天ト理ト同一タルニ非ス、今之ヲ譬フル天ハ猶國王ノ如シ、理ハ猶詔敕法令ノ如シ、今詔敕法令ヲ指シテ直ニ之ヲ國王ト云ハハ笑フ可ラサラムヤ、NAZ I: 505–6.

In the first section of this text I examined the expression of the Principle of things (natural law) and moral Principle, concluding that Nishi sees Heaven as providing these two Principles for human beings. In the passage above, Nishi specifies that Heaven conceives these two Principles. At the same time, he makes a clear distinction between the function of Heaven and the function of Principles, another example of his preoccupation with language and the precise meaning of terms. Elsewhere he criticizes the thinking of the Song Neo-Confucians, whose placement of natural phenomenon and human moral values on the same plane is “too coarse a point of view.”<sup>38</sup>

Sixth, the author explains the function of the word Heaven as denoting a status above everything and everyone:

Finally, Heaven is a word that indicates a rank; it simply means a supreme rank without equal.<sup>39</sup>

His intention seems to have been to clarify the linguistic function of the word, but he does not pursue the matter further.

Seventh, Nishi defines Heaven as that which *rewards*. In his view, when one respects the Principles laid down by Heaven, one benefits from eternal happiness, both in this world and beyond it. On the other hand, not to pay them heed is to be condemned to suffer in this world and even after death.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, Nishi concludes that humanity, the master of all beings, consists of recognizing one’s heart and nature, as explained above, and appropriating these two Principles into one’s life. He writes that if one did not trust in these Principles and their dependence on Heaven, and did not venerate the Way, even if one were to live in a splendid stone building—Nishi is referring to European architecture—that person would be no more than a worm living in a coral reef. The passage in question makes it clear that Nishi considered these the moral values that make one an authentic human being.

38. 措大の見, NAZ I: 170.

39. 蓋シ天ト云フハ其位ヲ指スノ辭ニシテ至高對ナキヲ云フノミ, NAZ I: 506.

40. 唯詔敕誥命ヲ尊奉スレハ、獨リ現世ノミナラス永遠萬ノ斯ノ幸福ヲ享ク、苟モ此ノ詔敕誥命ニ違ヘハ獨リ來世ノミナラス現世亦斯苦惱ヲ受ケ此罰テキヲ受ク, NAZ I: 506.

To recapitulate the essential points about the notion of Heaven:

- “Heaven,” the “Principle,” and the “Lord on High” constitute the object of belief of those who are educated.
- One’s choice of religion is individual and free.
- Heaven distributes the body and mental nature to human beings.
- Heaven is unknowable to humans. It is supreme and close to the truth, but is not itself the truth because it is unknowable for human beings.
- Heaven does not denote all celestial bodies.
- Heaven creates physical and moral Principles. Both appear from Heaven.
- The word Heaven denotes the supreme rank of Heaven
- Heaven rewards or punishes persons with happiness or suffering.
- Heaven expresses its will; Heaven can be called “Lord on High,” and thus allows for personification.
- Respect for Heaven makes one truly human.

#### SOURCES OF INSPIRATION FOR NISHI’S IDEA OF HEAVEN

We may now locate this concept of Heaven in the context of traditional schools of thought and isolate at least four sources of inspiration behind it: *The Book of Poetry* of Ancient China, Ogyū Sorai’s ideas of heaven, Zhu Xi’s doctrine, and Auguste Comte’s evolutionism.

First, as we have seen, the expression “Lord on High” and the idea of Heaven’s will are most certainly inherited from the idea of Heaven in *The Book of Poetry*, one of the oldest classical and canonical Confucian texts.<sup>41</sup> There, however, Heaven’s will shows itself through natural phe-

41. Indeed, Nishi sometimes has rather a nostalgic vision of the Zhou dynasty period and notably the western Zhou dynasty 西周 (eleventh century to 771 BCE). This is Hasunuma Keisuke’s opinion when he analyzes Nishi’s own choice of Chinese characters in his first name at the time of the Meiji reform (1867). Nishi chose the zhou 周 character which can be read in Japanese as *amane*. Thus, with his patronymic, his name becomes Nishi Amane 西周. Japanese people can read these characters in the

nomena, so that people as a whole suffer its effects, whereas in Nishi's thought it expresses itself to individuals in the form of pleasing rewards or painful punishments.

A second, and to my mind irrefutable, source of inspiration comes from the writings of Ogyū Sorai. It is well known that Nishi read Sorai's work with great interest. Sorai had the intellectual independence to criticise the work of Zhu Xi who was the subject of orthodox studies during the Edo era.<sup>42</sup> I have found several instances of identical expressions about Heaven in the works of Nishi and Sorai, for example the "respect for Heaven" (*tenkei* 天敬) "the unknowable nature of Heaven for humanity," and "the determination of human nature by Heaven."<sup>43</sup> Well before Nishi's time, in his 1717 work *Benmei* 『弁名』 on discerning the meaning of terms, Sorai had criticized the tendency of Song Dynasty Confucianists to fuse the ideas of Heaven and Principle.

Nishi uses the same argument to criticise a similar tendency in Zhu Xi. But despite this critique, one cannot escape the conclusion that Nishi's knowledge of orthodox Edo era doctrine is the starting point for his thoughts on Heaven. We have already noted his definition of the relationship between Heaven and Principle, namely that Heaven is the origin of Principle. Nishi certainly was careful to separate the two terms yet they remain at the heart of his thinking on Heaven. It is therefore necessary to acknowledge Zhu Xi's notion of Heaven-Principle as a source of inspiration for Nishi.

Regarding Nishi's attitude to Confucianism, his early education and study of the Zhu Xi School seemed to form the basis of the ideas he

Chinese way as *Sei Shū*, which sounds to Japanese ears like "Western Zhou" which is written with the same characters 西周. Hasunuma's hypothesis seems to me defensible at least as far as the meaning of Heaven is concerned. See HASUNUMA Keisuke 蓮沼啓介, 「西周に於ける哲学の成立」 [The birth of philosophy in Nishi Amane], (Tokyo: Yūhikaku, 1987), 1–20.

42. KOIZUMI Takashi, *op. cit.*, 32.

43. 天は解を待たず。[...] これを望めば蒼蒼然,冥冥乎として得てこれを測るべからず。See 「弁名」 [Distinguishing names] in 『荻生徂徠集』 [The Ogyū Sorai collection], 日本思想大系 36 (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1973), 120. For an English translation, see John A. Tucker, *Ogyū Sorai's Philosophical Masterworks: The Bendō and Benmei* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006).

would go on to refute and replace with the heterodox ideas of Sorai. Nishi and Sorai, however, both acknowledge the importance of the Ancient Chinese period that gave Confucian studies their canonical texts. We may therefore assert that Nishi's thought was in continuity with the Japanese school of Ancient Learning (*kogaku* 古学) of his era.

Nishi's thought, however, is not limited to this school of thought from the Edo era, and we cannot neglect to mention another source of inspiration from contemporary Europe, the evolutionist thinking of Auguste Comte. Nishi discusses the "law of three states" (theological, metaphysical, and positive) of the French philosopher in his lecture on the European sciences.<sup>44</sup> That said, we also have seen Nishi criticize this form of positivism as a kind of "materialism" insofar as it limits itself to the physical world.<sup>45</sup> Nishi clearly gave more importance to studies of the heart than to physical studies, which distinguishes him from Comte for whom research into the laws of nature represented the final stage in the evolution of society. Nishi believed that the more one was educated, the more profound a vision of religion one would attain and the greater the likelihood of arriving at the culmination of belief in Heaven and Principle and the Lord on High, the objects of genuine belief, pure and simple.<sup>46</sup>

All in all, Nishi took a critical approach to learning that was never satisfied with the ideas and the thoughts of others. Concerning his concept of Heaven, I would say that he developed a new set of ideas and that these ideas represent a synthesis of multiple sources of Chinese and Japanese inspiration with contemporary European ideas.

#### IS NISHI'S CONCEPT OF HEAVEN WIDELY ACCEPTED?

It remains to be seen to what extent Nishi's concept of Heaven exerted an influence on Japanese thinkers of his era. This is a difficult question to answer with any precision.

44. 「百學連環」, NAZ IV: 30–31.

45. 「百學連環」, NAZ IV: 36.

46. 「教門論」, NAZ I: 500.

Nishi's article on religion, which we referred to earlier, was published in the pages of the *Meiroku zasshi*, an avant-garde, liberal review favored by writers and intellectuals who wished to encourage the study of Western thought. As it turned out, the journal only survived for a year and a few months (March 1874 to November 1875), having been brought to an abrupt halt when a new law controlling the publication of newspapers was passed and writers decided to halt publication of the review as a protest against the law.

Be that as it may, at the beginning of the Meiji era the idea of respect for Heaven was widely held by many intellectuals, in particular by those who had been influenced by the Confucian school's texts. For example, Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901), one of Nishi's contemporaries, wrote a famous sentence known to all modern Japanese: "Heaven did not create some persons above others, nor some persons below others." These words were first published in 1871, prior to the publication of Nishi Amane's text on Heaven. One might also cite the example of Nakamura Keiu (1832–1891), who, on the basis of his Confucian understanding of Heaven, was drawn to Christianity during a stay in London at the dawn of the Meiji era.

This was all to change. Some twenty years later, Inoue Kowashi, who is today considered to have been the principal designer of the *Imperial Rescript on Education*, deliberately avoided the expression "respect for Heaven and veneration of divine spirits" (*keiten sonshin* 敬天尊神), because he believed it would lead to a polemic among different groups. In order to create the image of a completely Japanese emperor, he avoided all expressions with blatantly Chinese connotations. The idea of Heavenly rewards was also avoided as he felt it was "too banal."<sup>47</sup> Thus, in the *Imperial Rescript on Education* (1890) the word Heaven was not used to qualify the emperor and is only used once, in the expression *tenjō mukyū no kōun* 天讓無窮ノ皇運, the Heaven-sent eternal imperial destiny.

47. See the letter from Inoue Kowashi 井上毅 to Yamagata Aritomo 山県有朋, dated June 1890. It is reprinted in 日本近代思想大系 [Modern Japanese Thinking] 6 (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1990), 375–7.

## CONCLUSION

We have seen that the concept of “Principle” is defined by Nishi as that which is permanent and necessary, and that human beings can only ever understand partially what Principle is and never really know it fully. The Principle of physical things governs all living bodies, down to the smallest drop of water, whereas the Principle of the heart is unique to human beings. Heaven means the place from which these two categories of Principle are formed. Heaven, the Principle, and the Lord on High constitute the object of belief of the educated. We saw four sources of inspiration of this concept of Heaven and noted how Inoue Kowashi avoided the term and other expressions with Chinese connotations in writing the text of the *Imperial Rescript on Education*.

In the end, it seems to me that Nishi’s concept of Heaven was not widely adopted. Still, I would argue that certain meanings of his concept of Heaven were carried by another word, *shizen* 自然. Yanabu Akira notes that in the early years of the Meiji period “natural law” was translated *tenritsu* 天律, literally Heavenly law, or *seihō* 性法, the law of nature made in Heaven. By 1881, the term *shizenhō* 自然法 was often used to refer to natural law. Modern day Japanese still use this term.<sup>48</sup> *Shizen* thus gradually came to replace *Ten* (or *Tenchi*, Heaven and Earth) to refer to the European word “nature.”

In support of this hypothesis, I would cite the twentieth-century philosopher Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990). During a conference in the 1970s he spoke of the meaning of *shizen* in a way which went beyond the sum of the objects of natural sciences. He presented *shizen* as a moral force that takes humanity back to its original and authentic mental state. He saw it as including an intangible greatness in comparison to which human beings seem small. He further takes to word to refer to the origin of human existence, claiming that “a person grows in *shizen*.”<sup>49</sup> I

48. Yanabu Akira 柳父章, 『翻訳語成立事情』[Conditions in the formation of translation language] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shinsho, 1982), 125–48.

49. 自然のうちから生え出ている, NISHITANI Keiji 西谷啓治「禪の現代的意義」[The meaning of Zen today], 『宗教と非宗教の間』[Between religion and irreligion] (Tokyo: Iwanami gendai bunko, 2001), 89.

cannot help but see a certain affinity between Nishi's concept of Heaven and Nishitani's concept of *shizen*, though proper proof would require further research that takes into account the influence of Zen Buddhism on Nishitani, whose own vocabulary differs significantly from that of Confucianism.