

## On the Boundary between “Religious” and “Secular”

### The Ideal and Practice of Neo-Confucian Self-Cultivation in Modern Japanese Economic Life

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*The Neo-Confucian idea of self-cultivation has a long history of being applied to economic life in Japan. This paper looks at this history, beginning with the early development of the idea of self-cultivation in Sung China and its adoption into Japan and further development during the Tokugawa and modern periods. The analysis focuses on two intertwining themes: first, the attempt to find “spiritual” meanings for economic labor, and second, the instrumental use of such meanings by elite groups to promote particular economic and political purposes. The Neo-Confucian concept of self-cultivation aided both of these efforts, and thus an analysis of its use by academics, businessmen, and social philosophers over the centuries offers interesting insights on the broader topic of the relationship between religious values and economic life in modern Japan. It also raises important issues concerning the fine line between the use of self-cultivation as a spiritual end in itself and as a means to ultimately political or economic ends. A further theme involves the blurring of the boundaries between “religion” and “secular,” and “spiritual” and “commercial,” that seems to characterize most applications of the concept of self-cultivation to Japanese economic life whenever it has been used.*

THIS PAPER IS AN ATTEMPT to describe and analyze two closely related trends in the relationship between religious values and economic life in early modern and modern Japan: (1) the attempt to find “spiritual” meanings for economic labor, and (2) the instrumental use of such meanings by elite groups to promote particular economic and political purposes. By the former I refer to the long tradition of imbuing economic labor with spiritual meaning through applying the Neo-Confucian concept of “self-cultivation” (*shūshin* 修身) and using it to define work in terms of the development of individual “character” or “spirit.” At the same time these attempts to “spiritualize” the meaning and context of work have also often been accompanied by the efforts

of economic and political elites to use this “spiritualization of work” instrumentally to support the economic goals of government, merchant houses, or modern corporations. The role of the Neo-Confucian concept of self-cultivation has been to aid both of these goals (spiritualization and its instrumental use) by providing both a coherent philosophy and terminology, including specific spiritual meanings for economic roles, and the ideological support for economic and political appropriations of these meanings. The aim of this paper is to analyze such attempts to “spiritualize” work and the role Neo-Confucian concepts of “self-cultivation” played therein. At the same time it will examine the wider significance of these dynamics for the overall relationship between religious values and economic life in modern Japan, and for the meaning of “religious” and “secular” in this context.

In order to trace the development of this linkage between Neo-Confucian concepts of self-cultivation and their application to the economic sphere, it is first necessary to understand the Confucian concept of self-cultivation itself. This will be accomplished by summarizing the development of the idea of self-cultivation in traditional Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism in China, and its interpretations by early Tokugawa Neo-Confucian thinkers, both on the “elite” and “popular” levels. Following this will be an analysis of the more modern adaptations of the idea in the pre-World War II period (1868–1942) in the figure of the leading industrialist of the time, Shibusawa Eiichi 渋沢栄一 (1840–1931), and the labor-related organization he helped found (the Kyōchōkai 協同会). Finally, the post-World War II period will be looked at in terms of the underlying basis of many corporate employee training and education programs and the role of Neo-Confucian concepts of self-cultivation therein.

Emerging from this analysis is the conclusion that there has existed a “fine line” in Japan between the use of the Neo-Confucian idea of self-cultivation as a spiritual end in itself and as a means to ultimately political or economic ends. This “fine line” can be seen in all of the popular thinkers and movements to be discussed here, including the Tokugawa-era Confucian popularizer, Ishida Baigan 石田梅岩 (1685–1744) and the Shingaku 心学 movement, the Meiji and Taishō period industrial leader Shibusawa Eiichi and his Kyōchōkai, and many post-war corporate employee training programs. In fact it might be argued that this “fine line” no longer exists, since it has been crossed so many times that the history of the concept of “self-cultivation” as applied to economic life has become a history of spiritual meanings used primarily toward boosting economic production and building nationalism rather than developing spiritual character. This conclusion seems hasty, however, since examples from both the pre- and post-World

War II periods will show that views of self-cultivation as an end in itself co-existed with the use of it as a means toward achieving corporate and national economic and political goals. How was this possible? One answer lies in a basic assumption of the Neo-Confucian worldview itself, that is, that “secular” everyday life is a fully appropriate place for the exercise of individual “spirituality.” Thus the goals of Neo-Confucian self-cultivation as a type of spirituality possessed no inherent conflict with an application of that spirituality toward achieving economic goals. Instead, when conflict did occur, it only came from attitudes and actions that violated basic Neo-Confucian values, such as filial piety, social harmony, benevolence, and loyalty, by being “selfish” and not community-centered. In this way “self-fulfillment” for the individual consisted of character development toward Neo-Confucian virtues in community-centered social relationships. “Self-fulfillment” and “group goals” thus became fully integrated.

A lack of conflict between the norms of self-cultivation and their application to economic labor in Japan, however, did not exist from the beginning. Rather, it was something that had to be developed and “created” as the ideal of self-cultivation in Japan became increasingly popularized and applied to “practical learning” (*jitsugaku* 実学) starting in the Tokugawa period. In the Meiji period this ethic of self-cultivation was transformed even further, and by the later nineteenth century it was being applied to new modern forms of work and economic organization imported from the West. The essence of the transformation was a shift away from a focus on the scholarly study of “principle” (*ri* 理) and its manifestations in the world, towards how “virtue” was to be applied to everyday ordinary life and in terms of the achievement of broader national economic and political goals.

A second theme of the paper will be that the tradition of self-cultivation as applied to economic life in Japan has offered individuals an enhanced sense of “self-power” and in this way has been a very “functional” ethic. Given the almost futile nature of challenges to the status quo or one’s own role in it during the Tokugawa and prewar periods, an emphasis on self-cultivation thus was a means to both self-fulfillment and worldly success by allowing individuals to develop a sense of control and power over their environment through greater control and power over themselves. Self-cultivation was able to do this by helping the individual (1) to achieve actual social advancement through superiors recognizing and rewarding the “character development” that self-cultivation produced and its value to the group’s interests, and (2) to develop a strong sense of individual self-mastery for dealing with difficulties in life and the frustrations accompanying them. In this sense the tradition of self-cultivation can also be seen as

a variation of the Japanese Buddhist tradition of *jiriki* 自力, or “self-power.” While the tradition of self-cultivation may not have offered the same type of salvation promised by Japanese Buddhism, its use and meanings were nevertheless religious in many ways (DE BARY and BLOOM 1979, pp. 127–88; ROHLEN 1976). Moreover, it seems ironical that this increased sense of individual control and power coexisted with the instrumental use of the self-cultivation ethic by economic and political elites in such a way that the meaning of “self-cultivation” itself was sometimes defined so narrowly that individuals’ real power or control over the choice of their ideals and their own sense of “self” was taken away from them.

A third and last theme will be the blurring of the boundaries between “religion” and “secular,” or “spiritual” and “commercial,” that seems to characterize modern historical applications of the idea of self-cultivation to the economic sphere in Japan. In other words, just as “self-fulfillment” and “group goals” tend to be able to coexist in an overall ethic of self-cultivation in Japan, so too does the ethic of self-cultivation tend to exist in realms traditionally considered “religious” and “secular.” An obvious example of this is the incorporation of traditionally “religious” rituals and practices such as water ablutions, Zen meditation, and *rotō* 路頭 into the training of modern corporate employees.<sup>1</sup> Another example is the almost “religious” devotion modern corporations often require from their employees and the field of “ultimate meanings” and security they offer employees in return. Why are such “religious” practices and meanings found in the business corporation, the seemingly most secular of modern institutions? Before we can answer this question, it is necessary first to understand the history of the development of the idea of self-cultivation itself, beginning with its origins in China and early interpretations in Tokugawa Japan.

### *The Neo-Confucian Idea of Self-Cultivation in China and Tokugawa Japan*

The Sung Neo-Confucian idea of self-cultivation (Ch.: *hsiu-shen*, J.: *shūshin*) did not originate with Neo-Confucianism but can be traced back to much earlier Confucian texts dating from the time of Confucius. In *The Great Learning*, for example, all people from the Son of Heaven to the commoner are called upon to regard self-cultivation as the root of life. Other early texts, such as *The Doctrine of the Mean*, add to this picture by emphasizing the development of “sincerity” (*ch’eng*

<sup>1</sup> See ROHLEN 1973 for an example from a Japanese bank’s training program for new employees. DAVIS describes *rotō* as “wandering service” and points out its importance in the life of the founder of Ittōen (1992, pp. 192–206).

誠) as a key to the development of self-cultivation. Within the early Confucian worldview, then, self-cultivation was a lifelong *process* in which the final goal was to be the achievement of self-transformation and ultimately sagehood itself.<sup>2</sup> As a leading scholar of modern Confucianism, Tu Wei-ming, has argued, “Underlying this... is the conception that man is malleable and indeed perfectible through self-effort” (TU 1979, p. 71). The specific steps within the process consisted of four developmental stages: (1) “cultivating personal life,” (2) “regulating familial relations,” (3) ordering the affairs of the state,” and (4) “bringing peace to the world” (TU 1979, pp. 27–28). The order of this development, moreover, was crucial and had to begin with self-cultivation before extending outward in a series of concentric circles toward the family, community, state, and finally the world. Specific methods of cultivating the self consisted of striving to develop sincerity, benevolence, reciprocity, loyalty, and other virtues within the context of the five Confucian relationships.

Starting in the Sung period in China, Neo-Confucianism built upon these earlier traditions regarding self-cultivation but enlarged both their methods and processes, as well as redefining to a degree the nature of sagehood. According to Wm. Theodore DE BARY, for example, early Sung Neo-Confucianism had a stronger “religious or mystical view of the self in sagehood as united with all creation in such a way as to transcend its finite limitations” (DE BARY and BLOOM 1979, pp. 10–11). As a result, the Neo-Confucian practitioner in Sung and Ming China “sought to overcome the division of self and non-self, subject and object, or internal and external, through an experience of the unity of principle” (DE BARY and BLOOM 1979, p. 13). Buddhist and Taoist metaphysical and contemplative ideas influenced conceptions of this mystical experience and resulted in Neo-Confucians assimilating certain Buddhist and Taoist concepts and practices that “they considered reconcilable with their own conception of man.” The net effect was that Sung and Ming concepts of self-cultivation came to include the ideal of a personal experience of truth through a union with “heaven” in the mind-heart as well as a certain syncretism of the “Three Teachings” of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism (DE BARY and BLOOM 1979, pp. 11, 12, 22–23). These trends would be carried over into early Japanese Neo-Confucianism in the Tokugawa period.

While Neo-Confucianism was originally brought to Japan by Zen monks as early as the thirteenth century, Neo-Confucianism as an independent school in Japan only began in the early seventeenth

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Chapter 23 of the *Analecets* (LEGGE 1971, p. 417). Also see TU 1979, pp. 26, 73.



century under the sponsorship of the Tokugawa Shogunate. This sponsorship dates to the Confucian scholar Hayashi Razan 林 羅山 (1583–1657) and the Hayashi school that he established. As Herman OOMS (1985) and other scholars have pointed out, however, the particular type of Chu Hsi Neo-Confucianism that Hayashi represented was by no means the only type that existed in Tokugawa Japan, even in the early part of the period. This diversity of opinions is represented partly by the differences between Hayashi and his own teacher Fujiwara Seika 藤原惺窩 (1561–1619). While both viewed “self-cultivation” in terms of its application to the samurai scholar-official and not to commoners or to economic life, they differed in that Fujiwara’s was a more “spiritual cultivation” centering on the “experience of the unity of principle [*ri*] in active contemplation,” while Hayashi pursued a “more rational, scholarly and intellectual...study of both human society and natural science” (DE BARY and BLOOM 1979, p. 139). Thus, while Fujiwara focused on quiet sitting and mental and spiritual disciplines of the mind-heart learning (*shingaku*) of Chu Hsi, Hayashi tended to be more extroverted, empirical, and focused on the working of dynamic *ch’i* (*ki* 氣) in the world (DE BARY and BLOOM 1979, p. 135). This distinction is important, since it was Fujiwara’s ideas about mind-heart learning (along with their origin in Chu Hsi and Mencius) that in their popularized form under Ishida Baigan in the Shingaku movement supplied a major practical application of Neo-Confucian principles of self-cultivation to Tokugawa economic life on a popular level. On the other hand, it was Hayashi’s type of rationalistic, extroverted, and scholarly approach to learning and self-cultivation that would typify another major merchant-based Tokugawa school of Neo-Confucianism, the Kaitokudō 懷德堂 in Osaka.

There was a long leap necessary from the scholarly worlds of Fujiwara Seika and Hayashi Razan to the merchant worlds of the Shingaku movement or the Kaitokudō, however, since the traditional Neo-Confucian ideal of self-cultivation had been predicated on the achievement of “sagehood” by scholar-officials, not commoners, through a set of methods focusing on scholarly study of the traditional Confucian classics, not their application to economic labor. A redefinition of self-cultivation and its ultimate end, “sagehood,” therefore, was required before they could be put into terms of everyday life, especially economic life, in order to make the goal of sagehood and the process of self-cultivation more relevant to commoners and their economic labor. This was accomplished partially by the work of early Tokugawa Neo-Confucian scholars such as Yamaga Sokō 山鹿素行 (1622–1685), Itō Jinsai 伊藤仁斎 (1627–1705), and Kaibara Ekken 貝原益軒 (1630–1714). Yamaga’s specific contribution was his

redefinition of the model of the sage, which he transformed by arguing that the “sage’s true teaching consists in the *ordinary practice of virtue in human relations*” and the “regular pursuit of learning as it pertains to *everyday needs and functions*” (DE BARY and BLOOM 1979, p. 140; emphasis added). Yamaga thus shifted the ground of the practice of self-cultivation away from scholarly study and more toward ordinary social life. Itō Jinsai’s contribution was that he criticized what he saw as the Sung Confucian view of “man’s nature as essentially self-centered and self-absorbed.” Instead he argued that man’s nature must be “fulfilled in outward activity benefiting mankind” (DE BARY and BLOOM 1979, pp. 150–51). Kaibara Ekken, on the other hand, contributed the important breakthrough of a direct application of Neo-Confucian principles to everyday economic life in his *Kadōkun* 家道訓, or “Precepts on the Way of the Family,” published in 1711. As Mary Evelyn TUCKER has pointed out, Ekken “suggested new grounds for joining morality and economics, the latter being a subject not often addressed directly by Neo-Confucians, their primary concern being self-cultivation of the scholar-official” (1989, pp. 110–11). Ekken thus was able to link Neo-Confucian self-cultivation with frugality in both use and desire for material goods, and argue that the achievement of moral self-discipline was the key to success in one’s business and professional occupation.

The process of “popularizing” Neo-Confucianism begun by Yamaga, Itō, and Ekken was taken a step further by Ishida Baigan and the Shingaku movement he began in 1729. Baigan and his three more “elite” predecessors shared a common intellectual debt to the thought of Mencius, in particular the Mencian idea of “goodness as a universal human potential” (NAJITA 1987, p. 36).<sup>3</sup> As Tetsuo Najita has pointed out, “the Mencian idea of the internal moral capacity of all human beings to act in ways that were compassionate without regard to their formal status would evolve into one of the central concepts informing the moral consciousness of merchants throughout...the Tokugawa era” (NAJITA 1987, p. 43). This intellectual debt to Mencius also applied to the other major merchant school of Tokugawa Confucianism, the Kaitokudō.

While the Shingaku and Kaitokudō differed in many ways in terms of their approach to “self-cultivation,”<sup>4</sup> differences that in one sense

<sup>3</sup> For more information on the Mencian influence on Itō see NAJITA pp. 36–40. For the corresponding influence on Shingaku, see BELLANI 1985, pp. 148, 154; and SAWADA 1993, pp. 51, 106.

<sup>4</sup> Najita discusses the major differences as being that Shingaku tended to define itself as a “religion and introspective movement,” while for the Kaitokudō the idea of “spiritual self-transformation” was less of a major concern. Also, there was a syncretism of ideas from Neo-Confucianism, Zen, and Shinto in Shingaku, but Kaitokudō thinkers rejected syncretism and focused on the more rational traditions of Neo-Confucianism (NAJITA 1987, p. 96).

corresponded to those between Fujiwara Seika and Hayashi Razan (as pointed out above), both also shared certain common principles. These were as follows:

[1] All individuals regardless of status are endowed with a universal essence that is sagely and that goodness is to be acted out in the everyday world of work. [2] In their work... merchants contributed through trade to the well-being of the whole. [3] The ethics of trade are accuracy and thus the affirmation of human trust. [4] The labor of commoners, in short, was not morally inferior to that of the aristocracy and the “profits” of merchants was no different from the “stipend” of samurai as both are “gifts” from Heaven. (NAJITA 1987, p. 96)

They also shared a common ethic of “self-power” and “self-control.” In Shingaku this could be seen in Baigan’s idea of uniting one’s heart with heaven. Baigan writes in the *Toimondō*:

The good person (*jīnsha*) makes his heart united with heaven and earth and all things. There is nothing which can be said not to be himself. If he makes heaven and earth and all things himself, *there is nothing he cannot attain*. If one does not know the heart, there is a difference between oneself and heaven and earth.... This is like a sick man with paralyzed hands and feet. (BELLAH 1985, pp. 150–51; emphasis added)

Union with heaven through cultivation of the heart-mind thus gave the individual both power and autonomy (“there is nothing one cannot attain”), while a lack of self-cultivation resulted in the complete loss of individual power and control (“paralyzed hands and feet”). In the Kaitokudō, a similar sense of self-power and control came from the “empowering” philosophy that Itō Jinsai provided Kaitokudō thinkers in his “claims about the virtue of their [commoners’] lives and daily work” (NAJITA 1987, p. 27).

In Shingaku in particular, an important part of self-cultivation in economic life was selfless devotion to one’s occupation based upon practicing the five Confucian virtues and the five relationships. As Baigan argued,

If you do not know [your] occupation, you are inferior to birds and beasts. The dog protects the gate and the cock informs us of the time.... If as merchants we do not know our occupation, we shall come near the destruction of the family which our ancestors have transferred to us.... If we know righteousness how can there be an inclination to neglect our occupation? (BELLAH 1985, p. 164)



Baigan and the Shingaku movement thus explained the deeper spiritual meaning of occupation and work while at the same time justifying the status quo arrangement of work roles and organization of the economy. For example, in his idea of the merchants as retainers and thus similar to samurai in their devotion to duty for the benefit of all, Baigan defended the current class structure of Tokugawa society while trying to elevate the status and meaning of commoner occupations. Shingaku thought thus was “functional” for individual followers by giving them greater meaning and a sense of greater power and control.

It was also “functional” from the point of view of the higher authorities since it preached obedience to the existing social order and devotion to allotted roles in that order. In this way, while Shingaku thought represented a trend toward “spiritualizing” ordinary work, it also resulted in a “politicizing” of this spiritual message by its appropriation of the value of obedience to politically ascribed social roles. Moreover, while there were undoubtedly merchants who incorporated Shingaku principles concerning the spiritual meaning of frugality, hard work, and devotion to the merchant house primarily on the basis of their own belief in such spiritual principles, there were also merchants who must have supported it more for the economic benefits it produced in terms of creating hard-working and loyal employees.

Yet, while merchant houses and the government might use Shingaku thought instrumentally as a means for their own ends, for individual believers there was clearly the promise of “self-fulfillment” in Shingaku ideas. This derived partly from the satisfaction of having mastered “self” and performed one’s social duties and obligations fully. A sense of self-fulfillment also came from the expansive enlightenment experience of “unity with heaven” that Shingaku believers strove to attain.

Philosophically, views of “self” and “community” within Shingaku assumed that all meaningful change only begins with internal change within the individual, not change in community values or goals. Thus, the “community” was viewed as a part of the “natural world” and something to be accepted and harmonized within the process of seeking self-fulfillment. In fact, “self-fulfillment” was to a large extent found *only* in harmonizing self with community. This idea of course was a thoroughly Confucian one. It was also a viewpoint that profoundly affected Japanese views toward “self” and work not only in the eighteenth century but throughout the rest of the Tokugawa period, as well as into the post-World War II era.

*Shibusawa Eiichi and Pre-World War II Adaptations of the  
Ethic of Self-Cultivation to Japan's Modernization*

Shibusawa Eiichi, one of the most important industrialists of the Meiji period, was involved in the establishment or operation of more than 500 companies during a long and active business career spanning the Meiji (1868–1912) and Taishō (1912–1926) periods. Shibusawa was also an ardent supporter of the application of Confucian values to economic life, reflected in his long record of speeches, articles, and books on this subject. The son of a well-to-do farmer, he was educated from the age of seven in a Tokugawa-era Confucian school. Although he had a lifelong reverence for the teachings of Confucius and Mencius, he also had a critical attitude toward what he saw as the overly scholarly approach of Chu Hsi Neo-Confucianism. Instead, Shibusawa focused on what he saw as a practical adaptation of the idea of “self-cultivation” (*shūyō* 修養) and the more modern idea of “personality” or “character” (*jinkaku* 人格) in building his own philosophy of how the modern Japanese businessman was to synthesize Confucian morality with modern business principles.

Shibusawa's mature philosophy is well summarized in a popular book he wrote in the latter part of his career, *Rongo to soroban* 論語と算盤 (The *Analects* and the Abacus), published in 1928 and still in print today. Divided into ten chapters, with headings such as “Righteousness and Prosperity,” “Character and Cultivation,” “Enterprise and Bushido,” and “Articles of Faith and Getting Ahead in the World,” the central theme of the book was the reconciling of Confucian “benevolence and righteousness” (*jingi* 仁義) with “wealth and high rank” (*fuki* 富貴). The terms “The *Analects*” and “abacus” thus were used as symbols in the book to represent these two seemingly opposing ideas. Shibusawa expressed his own sense of the problem in the following way in the opening pages of the book:

I have always believed that the abacus is based upon the *Analects* and that real wealth comes from a combination of the *Analects* with the abacus. In other words, the relationship between the *Analects* and abacus is at once distant and close.... The foundation of wealth is righteousness and morality. If the wealth of a nation is not based upon the proper morality, such wealth will not last. I therefore feel that it is today's urgent task to integrate these two separated things: the *Analects* and the abacus.  
(SHIBUSAWA 1992, pp. 1–2)

The set of methods Shibusawa proposed for reconciling them began with integrating what he called “samurai spirit” and “commercial talent,” or *shikon shōsai* 士魂商才. In coining such a phrase he was revising

both a classical slogan of Sugawara Michizane 菅原道真 (845–903) as well as the more recent popular Meiji slogan, *wakon yōsai* 和魂洋才 (Japanese spirit, Western talent):

Long ago Sugawara Michizane coined a very interesting phrase, *wakon kansai* 和魂漢才 (Japanese spirit, Chinese talent). Although this is an interesting idea, I would like to advocate the idea of *shikon shōsai* (samurai spirit, commercial talent).... Of course, it goes without saying that in order to establish oneself in the world, the Bushido spirit is necessary. However, if one goes into business by following Bushido and possesses no commercial talent, one will certainly be doomed to economic failure. In other words, one needs commercial talent along with the samurai spirit. In order to *cultivate* the samurai spirit, various books are necessary, but the most fundamental of all for *cultivation of the samurai spirit* is the *Analects*. But then how does one develop commercial talent? One can develop commercial talent by following the *Analects* too. At first sight, it appears that there is no relationship between the morality appearing in literary books and commercial talent. However, this thing called commercial talent originally comes from a moral foundation. Commercial undertaking without a moral basis borders on deceit and dilettantism. It is chicanery, sophistry, but not truly great commercial talent.

(SHIBUSAWA 1992, pp. 2–3; emphasis added)

Shibusawa's idea of "self-cultivation" thus was to combine the samurai spirit (represented by the morality of the *Analects*) and practical commercial talent (represented by the abacus) in the personality or character (*jinkaku*) of the individual businessman.

Shibusawa's understanding of "self-cultivation" becomes clearer in his ideas on the qualities of character that the new Meiji era businessman must possess. These were well outlined by the Ryūmonsha 竜門社, an association of young businessmen organized around Shibusawa that attempted to put his ideals into broader practice. According to the Ryūmonsha, these qualities were education, honesty, virtue, and the ability to synthesize the principles of the *Analects* and the abacus. Such qualities, of course, not only mirrored Shibusawa's own thinking on the subject but pointed out the deficiencies, in Shibusawa's mind, of the traditional Japanese merchant class (HIRSCHMEIER 1965, p. 239).

For Shibusawa the desired qualities of character for the new businessman were also encompassed in the traditional samurai code of Bushido. Shibusawa thus could claim that Bushido itself must be the "way of the new merchant" (HIRSCHMEIER 1965, p. 239). To prove this

point, he made the following argument:

The notion that Bushido and profit-making are incompatible was erroneous in feudal times just as it is today. People now have seen the reason why benevolence and riches and honor are not contradictory. Confucius said: "Riches and honors are what men desire. If they are not obtained in the right way, they should not be held. Poverty and lowliness are what people despise. If they are brought to the people in the right way, they should not be avoided." This saying is consistent with the essential precepts of Bushido, i.e. righteousness, integrity, and magnanimity.... Of course, even the sage desires riches and honors and dislikes poverty and lowliness. *However, the sage regards morality as of primary importance and the issue of wealth and poverty as of secondary importance.*

(SHIBUSAWA 1930, pp. 222-24; emphasis added)

Shibusawa makes it clear here that morality must not be simply a means to gain wealth but an end in itself. "Morality" of course equaled the morality of the *Analects*. This, in turn, was essentially the morality of Bushido. Both were the proper spirit for modern Japanese capitalism and in Shibusawa's view would reshape the character of the Japanese businessman away from the obsequious and cunning Tokugawa merchant toward a public-minded and well-educated modern businessman.

An essential part of this new morality and cultivation of character by Japanese businessmen was to be a subordination of private interests to the welfare of the nation. As one scholar of Shibusawa's life has pointed out:

Just as the samurai class... called upon the individual to serve society even at the sacrifice of his life.... [s]imilarly, insisted Shibusawa, a modern businessman is essentially a servant of his country, a promoter of economic—notably industrial—progress.... His ideal of a *jitsugyōka* 実業家 [industrialist]... was that he work selflessly and with dedicated honesty to further economic progress.

By "building modern enterprise on the abacus and *The Analects*," Shibusawa thus sought to combine the best of the West with the best of Japanese tradition: economic rationality in the service of the community. (HIRSCHMEIER 1965, pp. 244-45)

Yet in Shibusawa's thought there is also a "fine line" between such advocacy of Confucian morality as an end in itself and as a means toward the goal of enriching the country. For example, in his book *Dotoku keizai go isssetsu* 道德経済御一説 (An Argument on the Harmony of Morality and Economy), after a long passage in which he explains

why Confucian morality and modern economics are not in conflict (and how Confucius himself never despised wealth but only wealth obtained dishonestly), Shibusawa states his own aims as follows:

First of all my great desire has been that if we hope for the genuine prosperity of the country, we must endeavor to enrich it; that if we want to make the country wealthy, we must depend upon the activity of industry and commerce conducted according to modern scientific methods; that the promotion of industry and commerce calls for the organization of the cooperative system; which in turn must be controlled by sound and solid moral reason; and that there is but one standard for moral reason, which is *Lun Yu* (the *Analects*).<sup>5</sup>

This line of reasoning seems to start with the primary goal of prosperity for Japan and then works back until one arrives at the right morality in Confucian ethics. In this way, Shibusawa seems to present Confucian morality at least partly as a means to helping accomplish what he saw as the most pressing need of his time: the prosperity of Japan.

One can also note the many similarities between Shibusawa's thought and that of Ishida Baigan, who also advocated applying samurai ethics to the merchant class and did so by redefining merchants as "retainers." Shibusawa thus in one sense only updated this image by substituting "nation" for "feudal lord" and dropping the word "retainer" in favor of *jitsugyōka* (industrialist), while retaining Baigan's definition of the essence of samurai morality applied to commerce as lying in the qualities of "learning" (*gakumon* 学問), "righteousness" (*gi* 義), "benevolence" (*jin* 仁), and "honesty" (*shōjiki* 正直). On the other hand, Shibusawa differed from Baigan in that he did not talk directly about "spiritual experiences" as the Shingaku movement did, but focused upon the values of learning, honesty, righteousness, and benevolence applied to practical business affairs.<sup>6</sup>

Shibusawa's ultimate goal, then, was to construct a harmony in Japan between Confucian "morality" and modern "economics," a harmony he found in the idea that wealth and economic productivity *could* be a way of practicing virtue, as long as they were carried out in a spirit of righteousness and for the benefit of the community, rather than for private gain. Yet Shibusawa was intelligent enough to know that this integration would not happen by itself and went against certain "natural"

<sup>5</sup> As found in OBATA 1937, p. 269.

<sup>6</sup> Shibusawa's son, Hideo, relates that his father's ideas tended to follow those of Baigan, especially in his later years, a result of Shibusawa's own study of Sekimon Shingaku writings (YAMAMOTO 1992, p. 191; NAKAJIMA 1994, p. 117).



tendencies in men to run after personal wealth and fame. Thus he saw the need for educational programs to develop the new type of Japanese businessman and economy he envisioned. These programs began with his many writings and speeches to business groups and the establishment of the young businessmen's group, the Ryūmonsha. Later, they extended to his substantial involvement in the Kyōchōkai (Harmony Society), a semi-governmental organization devoted to labor-management issues.

The Kyōchōkai was established in 1919 with the financial support of a number of Japan's top industrial companies and the Home Ministry of the government with the aim of fostering a more "harmonious" relationship between Japanese management and labor through public advocacy and educational programs for both management and labor. It was inaugurated at a time when labor strikes in Japan had increased sharply (1916-1918) and government concern over the "labor problem" was rapidly increasing. The two main early leaders of the Kyōchōkai were Shibusawa and Home Minister Tokonami Takejirō 床次竹二郎. Together they created what they called a doctrine of harmonism (*kyōchōshugi* 協調主義), which they felt represented a Japanese approach to the problem of reconciling the rights and duties of management and labor. Although never a very clear and coherent doctrine, the general outlines of this philosophy were the avoidance of confrontation between labor and management through encouraging a "spirit of cooperation and harmony among all segments of the nation." In practice, what this meant sometimes varied between Tokonami and Shibusawa, with the former not supporting trade unions but only small company-based unions, while Shibusawa in principle supported trade unions. Both, however, placed great emphasis on "moral and ethical values as defining the parameters of acceptable political and economic action" and viewed current labor problems as the result of a "breach of harmony between capital and labor." Both also felt that the solution was practicing the Confucian "kingly way" (*wang tao* 王道) of having labor and management come to understand that their interests were "common to each other" so that "true harmony between them can be fully established." In other words, both viewed the fundamental problem as *moral* and not economic, and the solution as thoroughly Confucian, i.e., harmony and reciprocity between labor and management, to be accomplished by each carrying out their respective roles in society. Because of direct government involvement in the Kyōchōkai, Kyōchōkai philosophy also became the core of official government labor policy in the 1920s (SMITH 1973, pp. 23-24; KINZLEY 1991, pp. 51, 63, 65).

Interestingly, the philosophy of the Kyōchōkai reflected an almost

spiritual view of the relationship between labor and management. Tokonami and Shibusawa, for example, stressed what they saw as the error of Western societies' overemphasis on competition, which, according to Tokonami in particular, inevitably led to social conflict and "ignored the essential oneness of things." He maintained that while "all things differed from one another... each was part of a larger whole." For Tokonami, while capital and labor may seem to be far apart and distinctly different entities, "from the point of view of the state, capital and labor are the same thing," since each had an "economic task to perform, each brings differing skill needed in the economy, and each is equally important and an equally necessary part of the economy" (KINZLEY 1991, p. 53). This argument is reminiscent of Ishida Baigan and his vision of the "oneness" of merchants, artisans, farmers, and samurai in Tokugawa society, each having their own role to play and each being "retainers" in their own field.

Even more noteworthy in Kyōchōkai thought, however, is the strong emphasis on the need for the "character development" of workers. In a speech in 1918, for example, in a statement of his views on labor unions, Shibusawa placed "improvement of character" first in a list of the proper goals for a union:

If unions are formed with no purpose other than to oppose capitalists, they are not good. But if unions are organized to *improve the character of workers*, elevate their status, or to meet special emergency situations, I am in no way opposed to them.

(KINZLEY 1991, p. 61; emphasis added)

A similar viewpoint was adopted by the Kyōchōkai as an organization. Its worker publication, *Hito to hito* 人と人 (People Together), for example, aimed

to *expand the knowledge and enrich the spirit of workers* through the presentation of "healthy reading materials."...In the hope of "*cultivating refined taste*" (*kōshō naru shumi o shūyō* 高尚なる趣味を修養) *Hito to hito* also regularly published serialized novels, short stories and poetry. These offerings tended to be less refined than didactic; *counseling hard work, frugality, honesty and fidelity*.

(KINZLEY 1991, p. 96; emphasis added)

Such "worker self-cultivation" was also inculcated through Kyōchōkai schools, one of the most important being the Rōmusha Kōshakai 労務者校舎会 (Workers Training Society). According to a Kyōchōkai managing director at the time, Tazawa Yoshiharu 田沢ヨシハル, the primary goal of this training program was "to bring about an awareness of the true meaning of social cooperation (*shakai kyōchō* 社会協調) and

to foster a healthy understanding of social problems” (KINZLEY 1991, p. 98). Kyōchōkai leaders also intended that such training would provide “a compelling course of spiritual and political education” (*seishin kyōiku* 精神教育, *seiji kyōiku* 政治教育) for workers. Such intentions were based upon the assumption that a sound system of education “must be education for both intellectual and moral advancement” since “imparting information alone is not adequate.” Another assumption was that “healthy” moral values would lead inexorably to “acceptance of the value of organized community... and moral community” (KINZLEY, 1991, p. 99). In this way, the Kyōchōkai’s approach to worker education was clearly Confucian by assuming that education was primarily a “moral enterprise” and that the “most effective method for producing the morally superior man was through moral example of superiors conveyed through close personal ties” (KINZLEY 1991, p. 99). In Kyōchōkai schools, this moral example was carried out by teachers and students (workers) mixing on an egalitarian basis. Kyōchōkai educational programs thus strove to carry out Shibusawa’s (and the Home Ministry’s) vision of worker “self-cultivation,” leading to a more harmonious modern industrial society.

Yet, since the initial funding for the Kyōchōkai came partly from larger industrialists, the impression that the Kyōchōkai was not completely evenhanded in its advocacy of industrial harmony always remained with many private sector labor leaders and activists. Moreover, the potential to use such educational programs as a means to make workers more docile and accepting of their proper “Confucian” role as workers was never far from the surface. Such programs thus exemplified an attempt not only to “spiritualize” work but also to allow a potential use of Confucian spiritual principles by elites. This was nowhere clearer than in the thinking of many government officials at the time, for whom “thought guidance” (*shisō zendō* 思想善導) had become “the central element in building an ideology that would lead to social cooperation and stability rather than social conflict” (KINZLEY 1991, p. 93; PYLE 1974, p. 159). Apparently absent from this moralistic thinking was the idea that problems in labor-management relationships might also require fundamental changes in the relative shares of economic prosperity that workers and managers enjoyed at the time.

Yet the Kyōchōkai was not alone in these assumptions regarding worker “self-cultivation” in Taishō Japan. Labor schools formed by independent labor organizations such as the Sōdōmei 総同盟 also included courses in social ethics in their curriculums. In Sōdōmei courses, for example, this included “special attention to the moral obligation of the workers to honor and serve the Emperor” (LARGE

1981, p. 89). And as Thomas SMITH has noted, “Charters of workers’ clubs and proto-unions almost invariably listed among their objections the improvement of workers’ character (*hinkō* 品行, *hinsei* 品性) as well as the achievement of higher status” (1988, p. 245).

Moreover, even such radical labor thinkers as the anarchist Ōsugi Sakae 大杉 栄 stressed the importance of worker “self-cultivation” and “spiritual education” as a part of the means toward achieving social revolution and a new form of society. According to Thomas Stanley in his biography of Ōsugi, for example, Ōsugi criticized some socialists for overemphasizing the role of the social environment and ignoring the “spiritual dimensions” of the development of individuals. According to Ōsugi,

When the workers have completed these preparations themselves, that is to say, when they are able to administer their own society, then for the first time will come the social revolution. *Thus the workers’ spiritual education is the essential thing.* You must teach the workers what they themselves will, you must discipline them by action.

(STANLEY 1982, p. 70; emphasis added)

Ōsugi concluded that syndicalism was preferable to socialism since it focused on the “educational process, striving to prepare each worker to perfect his ego and to work together with other workers” (STANLEY 1982, p. 70). Thus while Ōsugi may have used the word “ego” instead of self, and although his view of the future society was clearly not a Confucian one, nevertheless part of his method for getting there relied on deeper thought patterns influenced by Confucian assumptions about self-cultivation and “spiritual education.”

In this way in the prewar period, as reflected in both the popular and influential writings of Shibusawa Eiichi and in actual labor education programs he was involved in, there was a subtle combination of the presentation of self-cultivation as an individual ethic of self-development worthy as an ultimate end in itself, and its use as a means toward fostering economic growth and the smooth integration of new Western modes of production and economic organization. The extent to which such assumptions about self-cultivation pervaded thought about economic life, from an industrial tycoon like Shibusawa to elite government bureaucrats like Tokonami, and from labor activists to anarchists, reflects the strong inclination towards “spiritual” solutions to what was seen as a crisis in labor-management relations. This crisis ultimately would be resolved by the beginning of war with China, first with the Manchurian Incident of 1931 and later with full-scale war in 1937, after which a national mobilization of both labor and manage-

ment for the war effort erased any remaining stains of conflict in the name of national honor and patriotism.

*Post-World War II Corporate Spiritual Education Programs*

While in the pre-World War II period Shibusawa offers a convenient symbol for the broader trend to attempt to synthesize Confucian ethics and modern economic organization and practices, in the post-World War II period there is no one convenient personal symbol of the same trend. Rather, it is the relatively widespread use of various forms of corporate training programs, held both inside and outside of companies, that best represents the continuation of the tradition. Anthropological studies of Japanese companies throw light on these practices, especially earlier studies published by Thomas Rohlen in the 1970s (ROHLEN 1973, 1974, 1976, and ROHLEN and FRAGER 1976) and Dorinne KONDO's more recent work (1990). Below I would like to summarize their findings as regards the tradition of "spiritual" or "ethics" education applied to the Japanese workplace and offer my own additional interpretations of their significance.

In his study of the "spiritual education" (*seishin kyōiku*) program of a Japanese bank studied in 1969, Rohlen argued that the same philosophy of "spiritualism" (*seishinshugi* 精神主義) that he saw underlying the bank training program also underlies the philosophy of such well-known arts in Japan as flower arranging, judo, and the study of the tea ceremony. Rohlen further points out that this was the basis of the socialization and training of the samurai and prewar Japanese youth in public school moral education called *shūshin kyōiku* 修身教育 (literally, "self-cultivation education"). However while Rohlen uses the term "spiritualism," he could just as well have used the term "tradition of self-cultivation," since this would have been an equally accurate description of the actual methods and viewpoint adopted in all of these different areas. Moreover, the major difference in the postwar tradition of self-cultivation as compared to the prewar seems to be only the focus "for whom" self-cultivation was done—now no longer the emperor or nation but the company. In other words, the tradition of self-cultivation came to be used less for the purpose of fostering nationalism and more to draw support and moral affection to companies (ROHLEN 1973, p. 1543).

Yet even in the postwar period the nation is not forgotten in uses of the tradition of self-cultivation. In the bank Rohlen studied, for example,

the company stresses the service given to Japan by the bank



and urges its trainees to fulfill their responsibility to the nation through loyalty to their company. It is not uncommon that service to the bank even be characterized as service to the entire world and to world peace.... The bank and all other institutions, according to this view, serve as intermediaries between individual intentions to aid the greater society and the actual realization of national well-being.

(ROHLEN 1973, p. 1543)

The assumption here is that through awareness that their country and community are served by their service to the company, the employees will “strengthen their will to perform their work properly in the future” (ROHLEN 1973, p. 1544). This assumption in turn relies on the idea that individual cultivation not only leads to the betterment of the community and society but also results in individual character development and personal fulfillment. Thus,

In both China and Japan the social benefit of such training was seldom separated from the acknowledged benefits to the individual, and various arts and military skills, such as judo and the tea cult in Japan, were appreciated as important paths to spiritual growth. A point to note is that unlike in the West, there arose no distinctions encouraging the separation of the individual and the social or the sacred and the secular in education.

(ROHLEN 1973, 1556)

In other words, by using the tradition of self-cultivation in modern corporate training programs, companies have minimized the potential conflict between social duty (work) and individual self-fulfillment by defining self-cultivation itself in terms of work duties.

The actual content of the training in Rohlen’s study consisted of a three-month program, where the more dramatic events consisted of Zen meditation, a visit to a military base, *rotō*, various team activities during a weekend in the countryside, and a final twenty-five-mile endurance walk. Each of these activities was intended to teach certain lessons and cultivate certain qualities of character, namely: *Zen meditation*: self-discipline, a sense of “no-self” and self-improvement; *visit to a military base*: spiritual strength, group conformity, obedience, and perseverance; *rotō*: humbleness, gratitude for work, and work as service; *weekend in the country*: group cooperation, vitality, and energy; and *endurance walk*: perseverance and self-mastery. The common messages in all of these were building “spiritual strength” through cultivation of character and will; mastering the self through “killing” the ego and serving the greater community; and accepting authority and life requirements as given rather than attempting to change them.

Moreover, as with Tokugawa-era Shingaku or prewar labor training programs, a basic underlying assumption was a Mencian belief in the inherent goodness and perfectibility of man, and that, therefore, life's deepest meaning consisted in cultivating this perfectibility through self-cultivation.

However, it would seem that the underlying assumption of postwar Japanese corporate training programs also shares something with that of the Confucian philosopher Hsun Tzu. According to Tu Wei-ming, for example, in Hsun Tzu's thought,

levels of one's perfections are defined in terms of the malleability of one's human nature to communally shared values and norms.... One's willing participation in the perfecting process thus depends on internal self-cultivation as well as a *conformity to societal ideals*.... [In this way] *malleation according to well-established rituals* is undoubtedly the focus of Hsun-Tzu's educational efforts. (TU 1979, pp. 58-59; emphasis added)

The same could be said of most Japanese (pre- or post-World War II) programs aiming toward the self-cultivation of workers. The reason is that in these programs the final goal of character development becomes something defined more by society than by the individual:

Inevitably what is of value and meaning to individual spheres of life—matters of ethics and personal growth—becomes entangled with the machinery of great political and social ambitions. Large-scale efforts recognize and attempt to create a specific kind of ideal person suited to the requirements of large-scale mobilization.... A pattern of state-sponsored moral education and military training gradually emerged that aimed primarily at efficient mass action. The requirements of large-scale mobilization thus provided another reason to set aside the ideal of gradual and highly individual progress.... As before, the tradition [of spiritual education] was greatly distorted [in the prewar period]. Political authority was inserted where personal experience (and perhaps a personal teacher) had been appropriate. What was to be learned from life was replaced by codified rules and principles.... Western utilitarianism was combined with traditional Japanese values on hard work, devotion to duty, to produce "loyal and filial subjects" thought necessary to produce a rich and strong country and modern state.... What in its benign form constituted many paths to personal fulfillment now became limited to those officially acceptable... What was lost was the sense of personal cultivation for its own sake. (ROHLEN, 1976, pp. 135-38)

Yet what Rohlen forgets in this passage is that the goals of socially defined “character development” in prewar Japan were *consistent* with those of earlier periods of Japanese history. In other words, the ideal character traits have *always* been those of perseverance, self-mastery, selflessness, fortitude, and community- or group-centeredness, while the only thing that changed after Meiji was that the “social” focus of such virtues shifted from clan-centered struggles over political dominion to a nation-centered struggle to achieve the goals of a “rich country, strong military” within the international arena. Thus, although the specific tools or methods of developing individual character changed, (e.g., from the traditional martial arts or tea ceremony to long hours working at the office or factory) the underlying philosophy changed little. Also, Rohlen’s argument that earlier more individualistic aspects of the tradition of self-cultivation that had existed in previous times were suppressed for the sake of group mobilization from the Meiji period onward ignores the fact that such suppression had occurred equally often in earlier times as well. Thus, the contrast was not the difference between the “use” of self-cultivation by large organizations in feudal times and the modern era, but the difference between the use of self-cultivation by large organizations (premodern *or* modern) and its use by smaller groups of artists and individuals practicing and perfecting their skills outside of the political realm.

Another aspect of postwar spiritual education programs is their “religious” nature, which is analyzed relatively briefly by Rohlen and Kondo. For example, both of them mention Zen meditation training and the use of such concepts as “no self.” Rohlen in particular refers to the practice of *rotō* and its use by Buddhist temples, while Kondo mentions the use of water ablution (*misogi* 禊) and its use by Shinto ascetics (ROHLEN 1973, p. 1551, and KONDO 1990, p. 88).

However, one might add that the tremendous emphasis on “perseverance” in the training exercises in both studies (and most corporate or private spiritual or ethics education programs) represents, in many ways, a secular form of “faith,” with all its ramifications of the need to overcome “temptations” and “spiritual weakness” on the long road to a secular type of “salvation” represented by individual career advancement and the success of the company. Moreover, the term *magokoro* 真心, frequently used in both types of these training programs, represents a variant form of the Neo-Confucian idea of “sincerity” (itself a key to the process of self-cultivation and sagehood), while references in Kondo’s study on the need to “polish the self” reminds one of the Zen Buddhist concept of polishing the mirror of one’s self so it can reflect reality as it is. Overall what stands out in both studies in a reli-

religious sense is that the ideas and practices are presented in the form of a “way” (*michi* 道), that is, an all-encompassing philosophy with a full set of spiritual meanings and answers to life’s questions. On the basis of this fact, Rohlen compares the ultimate aims of such corporate training programs with “states of understanding and being for which the labels ‘enlightenment’ and ‘salvation’ are as close as we can get in English” (ROHLEN 1976, p. 128). The “religious” nature to such programs and the philosophy of self-cultivation underlying them thus seem hard to deny.

Yet some observers might question putting the label “religious” on such practices and philosophy, since there seems to be a lack of the truly “transcendent” or “supernatural.” This objection, however, ultimately returns to the question of whether Japanese Neo-Confucianism itself is “religious,” given its emphasis on finding the “sacred” within secular activities centering on the community and social relationships.<sup>7</sup> The conclusion of the leading Confucian scholar Wm. Theodore de Bary on this issue seems particularly apt:

For the Neo-Confucian, “reality” attached to basic human relationships and the secular tasks in the midst of which he could find his fulfillment as a person. It did not... mean a denial of religion or an end to spirituality.

(DE BARY and BLOOM 1979, p. 173)

Perhaps a better question to ask, then, is why in Japan the boundary between “secular” and “sacred” has been so porous, i.e., why “religious” thinking and practices have been incorporated so often and so thoroughly into the most seemingly secular of all modern settings—the modern business corporation? In the prewar period the answer to this question was that business and political leaders saw the need to preserve what they felt were “traditional values” and the social relationships that went along with them in the face of the tremendous changes brought by modernization and Westernization. They therefore turned to the past and their own traditions and imbued these values with a “religious” or “sacred” flavor. In the postwar period, the reasons were similar, but in the case of business leaders in particular, the disappearance of prewar public moral education in the schools left a gap that in their minds needed to be filled by company training in order to create the type of dedicated employee that their own personal values and sense of mission demanded. In this sense, the apparent secularization that occurred in postwar public opinion surveys reflects less a real secularization than the transfer of part of the tradi-

<sup>7</sup> For a more extended argument on this point see FINGARETTE 1972.

tional religious functions and feelings from the neighborhood shrine, temple, nation, and emperor to the modern corporation on the one hand and various New Religions on the other.

Yet there remains the issue of what seems to be an often blatant (at least to an outsider) use of the tradition of self-cultivation to support devotion to work, company interests, and “control” over not only employees’ time but also their very ideals and concepts of self. The subtle appropriation of the nuances of filial piety and traditional ideas about parent-child relationships to the relationship between employee and company is a fact of postwar corporate Japan that is reflected in the way systems of lifetime employment, extensive company welfare systems, and other types of dependencies are cleverly employed by large companies toward their employees. For smaller companies that may lack some of these features, the traditional apprenticeship system can work to effect a similar result. Although these systems are not always successful in making every employee feel the company is a type of parent and therefore to be honored and obeyed, many Japanese companies continue to feel the need to encourage feelings of “filial piety” in their employees, as Kondo’s study shows (KONDO 1990, pp. 97–100, 113–14). Moreover, such feelings of “filial piety” toward the company actually do develop in enough cases that such programs and institutional arrangements seem to be working, albeit often on an unconscious level.

In addition to the Confucian value of filial piety, postwar Japanese companies also appropriate the traditional Confucian theme of “community as holy rite” through extensive company welfare schemes, the implicit promise of lifetime employment, and the “rites” that surround the company-employee relationship, beginning with the “initiation” ceremony into a new company as described by Rohlen and others.<sup>8</sup> The “trials” that accompany service in the company (long hours, hard work, time away from family), the “faith” (perseverance) that the founder had in order to overcome many hardships and build the company into what it is today (and therefore what all employees also are expected to develop), and the ultimate meanings given to these actions in imputing them with spiritual meanings through such phrases or slogans as “working to build a future paradise” (ROHLEN 1974, pp. 48–49) or establishing a society of “peace and happiness through prosperity”<sup>9</sup> reflect additional parallels with traditionally religious

<sup>8</sup> See ROHLEN, 1974, pp. 35–51. A more contemporary example is portrayed in the film “Challenge to America: Old Ways, New Game,” (distributed by *Films for the Humanities*, Princeton, 1994) that shows a new employee initiation ceremony at Toyota Motors.

<sup>9</sup> This, of course, is the longer title of the popular magazine founded by Matsushita Electric Company founder Matsushita Kōnosuke 松下幸之助, usually entitled simply *PHP*. The choice of this name reflects Matsushita’s own philosophy of life and work. This philosophy is



themes. While often used instrumentally, such themes and their use reflect to a large extent the nature of corporate life and the lack of clear-cut boundaries between the “religious” and secular in postwar Japan.

### *Conclusion*

This paper has looked at the tradition of self-cultivation in early modern and modern Japan and its application to the sphere of economic life through the lens of various examples and through changes in the idea of self-cultivation over time. It has shown that the use of the concept of self-cultivation within economic life in Japan is a part of a tradition beginning in the early part of the Tokugawa period and continuing even today. While the tradition originated in applying the Neo-Confucian concept of self-cultivation to work so as to see the “spiritual meanings” behind one’s labor and occupation, at the same time these spiritual meanings have often been used by political and economic elites to justify certain types of economic roles and relationships in society. Within this context, the “self” of self-cultivation usually has referred to a “social self,” i.e., a self that can only be defined in terms of the social relationships into which the individual participates, and by participating takes on socially defined roles and expectations. These roles and expectations thus became a part of the definition of self-cultivation itself. “Cultivation” on the other hand has referred to a changing set of methods and practices, sometimes meditation, at other times mathematics, but always ultimately determined by community goals and needs.

The widening of the range of individual choice within the process of self-cultivation has also been an important trend, especially from the Meiji period onward with the increase in freedom to choose one’s occupation and to move upward (or downward) between various social statuses. However, this increase in the range of “choice” (“modernity” itself has sometimes been defined as the increase in amount of choices individuals have over their lives)<sup>10</sup> has generally been limited in both the prewar and postwar eras to individuals’ *initial* choice of occupation. In other words, once this choice was made, the “pattern” of how self-cultivation proceeded within any given occupation generally was not left up to individual decisions but followed

presented skillfully in the articles of the magazine, which portray a contemporary path of “self-cultivation” in well-written essays and personal accounts highlighting how a person can develop an attractive personality.

<sup>10</sup> I take this from a lecture by Peter Berger at Boston University, 1 December 1995.

clearly set formats according to traditional ideas about “self-cultivation” in that occupation. In addition, the state (at least in the prewar period) added its own layer of definitions of self-cultivation in the form of public school moral education (*shūshin kyōiku*), which further restricted the range of choice as to how an individual chose to “cultivate self.”

Still, within these confines, individuals were allowed and encouraged to “develop themselves” through work, which in essence meant learning and mastering various techniques, but also, more importantly, the proper qualities of character for their occupation. While these qualities varied to some degree by occupation, most occupations tended to share a number of fundamental ideal character qualities: diligence, perseverance, obedience to authority, conformity to group standards, and respect for social harmony. “Self-cultivation” thus was defined in terms of one’s ability to develop these qualities of character and the techniques one’s occupation required. Self-fulfillment came from mastery of these techniques and character traits and one’s resultant achievement within the company or individual occupation. The tradition of self-cultivation thus was functional for the larger community in that it helped produce more productive workers. It was also functional for individual workers by helping them exert a certain control over their own lives and environment through their efforts toward self-cultivation.

In concluding let us return to two of the three themes outlined in the introduction and comment on them in more detail in light of what has been presented above.

The first of these is that of the use of self-cultivation as both an end in itself and as a means to other ends, namely, greater economic development and productivity by workers. Here “spiritualization of economic life” undoubtedly made work infinitely more meaningful for some workers and thus was not inherently inconsistent with the use of these spiritual meanings to foster productivity. In fact, in order for the “use” of spiritual meanings to really be effective, workers truly had to believe in the meanings themselves. If workers did not believe in these meanings, then the meanings were that much less effective. At the same time, a purely instrumental use of spiritual meanings without any true “content” also ultimately destroyed the very meanings themselves.

The “use” of religion or religious meanings in this regard is not unique within Japan to the tradition of self-cultivation. Rather, it has been a general trend of Japanese religious life, in particular the state’s use of religion since the introduction of Confucianism and Buddhism in the sixth century until the end of World War II. The Meiji era version

of this state use of religion and its justification was articulated by Nishi Amane 西 周 (1829–1897) and various prewar government leaders, bureaucrats, and industrialists, who consciously made use of certain religious doctrines, the most obvious being Shinto (HARDACRE 1989).

This Japanese state use of religious meanings raises an argument made by Robert Bellah in the introduction of the 1985 edition of his now classic *Tokugawa Religion*. Bellah makes the case that religion in modern Japan generally has been “used as a means to another end (modernization)” and an “aesthetic escape” from the competitiveness of the modern world rather than “setting the ends of life” (BELLAH 1985, pp. xviii, xx). While admitting some truth to what Bellah proposes, I would argue that, especially regarding the “use” of religious values by elites, he missed the main point: Japanese religion *does* set the ends of life in many cases, in particular in regard to some of the overall values that govern modern Japanese economic life. For example, the very idea of “social harmony,” which Bellah rightly identifies as the single most important value of Japanese religion, in fact helps set the “ends” of modern Japanese economic life by profoundly influencing the way economic organizations operate. Examples include practices such as lifetime employment, extensive employee welfare systems, company- rather than trade-based unions, extensive government aid to depressed industries, the highly inefficient government policy of protecting small retailers and farmers, and many other policies that attempt to maintain maximum social harmony. All these point to social harmony as an end in itself, and not just a means to further economic growth. This becomes more obvious when one considers what would happen in Japan if a policy stressing maximum economic growth and efficiency were substituted, and social harmony as a value was downgraded. The effect would be business corporations and the government pursuing policies different from those outlined above, specifically, more layoffs and less protection of small retailers and farmers. Consumer groups also would follow a very different policy than they do now, and would protest more against enormously high Japanese food prices instead of justifying them in terms of the need to protect the livelihoods of Japanese farmers. This is not to argue that disharmony and conflict are absent in Japanese society, or that the very economic and political policies used to encourage social harmony do not also suppress dissent among political and economic minorities. Rather, these factors are beside the main point, which is that there is evidence of strong influence from a clearly “religious” (in the sense of ultimate values) emphasis on the necessity of preserving social harmony in modern Japan.

Similar arguments also could be made for the Confucian values of “social reciprocity” and “benevolence and loyalty” as governing social relationships between superiors and inferiors within Japanese social organizations. These are clearly Confucian values and “sacred” in the sense of being of “ultimate concern” in Japanese society. Are they primarily used as “means” to promote economic ends, as Bellah argues? Again this does not seem to be the case.

On the basis of such arguments, one is forced to conclude that Bellah’s real point may be not that Japanese religion is used primarily as a means to other ends in Japan, but rather that for Bellah much of Japanese religion is not “transcendent” enough, in the sense that Christianity is. In other words, in Japan the “sacred” too often becomes the secular world itself. In this way secular group goals, such as economic development and prosperity, can become the “ends” of Japanese religiosity, rather than universal principles or a transcendent god. When such secular goals themselves are “sacred,” then the means to attain them (self-cultivation, for example) also become a part of a sacred path.

As a result, the application of the tradition of self-cultivation to economic life in Japan cannot be viewed *solely* as an institutional means for boosting economic production or efficiency but also must be seen as an attempt, at least in some cases, by thoughtful individuals and groups to integrate at the deepest level the “spiritual” values and “secular” goals of a society.<sup>11</sup> Prewar moral education (*shūshin kyōiku*) was one attempt at this on the broadest level of Japanese national life. However, similar attempts did not end with the conclusion of World War II. While public school emphasis on moral education shrank to something much smaller than its prewar equivalent, similar spiritual principles continued to be applied and integrated within the economic life of companies. Since the Western orientation is to view secular goals such as economic production as separate from spiritual life and ultimate meanings, it seems more difficult for Western theorists to accept such spiritualization of secular goals as being truly legitimate. In a culture where an underlying set of Confucian and Shinto assumptions about the sacredness of everyday life, community, and social relationships predominates, however, thoroughly secular goals such as company prosperity can become “transcendent” goals worthy of ultimate concern.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Similar attempts were made in an earlier era by Protestant capitalists and preachers in America and Europe. A contemporary U.S. effort in a similar direction can be found in CHAPPELL 1993.

<sup>12</sup> For further comments on the tendency of Western theorists to create a separation

It also bears mentioning that one inherent weakness of the Confucian or Neo-Confucian worldview underlying the tradition of self-cultivation is that for the average individual in a Confucian society the application of the concentric circles of (1) cultivation of personal life, (2) regulation of familial relations, (3) ordering the affairs of the state, and (4) bringing peace to the world, has meant in practice that the vast majority of people simply focus on levels (1) and (2) and leave (3) and (4) up to the country's leaders. As a result, a small group of government officials can monopolize the setting of national goals and ultimately determine thereby the very focus of individuals' self-cultivation and self-fulfillment. In other words, rather than the basis being self-cultivation radiating outward, the basis becomes national goals that then radiate inward and completely dictate the form and content of personal and family life.

Interestingly, this is a weakness in Confucianism of which Shibusawa was also at least partly aware. In his reading of the *Analects*, for example, Shibusawa found that it was much more "concerned about interpersonal relations but not much about individuals themselves," and more about the "process of governance than on the position of the governed." True to his own experience in leaving the government in the 1870s in order to develop a more self-reliant and autonomous modern business class, Shibusawa saw a corresponding need for the Japanese people as a whole to develop a greater sense of self-governance, something the traditional ethic of self-cultivation did not stress enough (TAI 1989, p. 78; SHIBUSAWA 1912, pp. 539-47).

On the other hand, as the social, political, and economic environments changed in Japan from the Tokugawa period into Meiji and later, the secular social goals that self-cultivation was associated with also inevitably changed. For example, as the ideals of the Tokugawa samurai-officials became increasingly focused on managing practical problems in society, and especially as these "practical" problems became a question of how to modernize Japan and defend Japan from the Western powers, the ideal of self-cultivation increasingly became fused with *jitsugaku*, or "practical learning." This *jitsugaku* ideal was promoted by such thoroughgoing modernizers as Fukuzawa Yukichi 福沢諭吉 (1835-1901) who generally had little room for traditional Confucian learning (*jūgaku* 儒学) in their systems. Yet followers of *jitsugaku* policies eventually were forced to incorporate various parts of Confucian moral traditions, including the self-cultivation ideal, in order to modify the effects of *jitsugaku* policies, which resulted in an

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between the sacred and profane or religious and nonreligious world, see KING 1987, pp. 282-83.



increasing Westernization not only of economic and political organizations but of moral values as well. In other words, *jitsugaku* policies eventually required an infusion of *jugaku* in the form of traditional Confucian moral values in order to solve what was seen as a moral crisis brought on by the effects of these very *jitsugaku* policies. In this way, the two types of learning eventually were intermingled, with the result that later applications of *jitsugaku* tended to include a place for moral values (e.g., the use of the Imperial Rescript on Education to help achieve political goals and the use of Confucian values in the workplace). On the other hand, *jugaku* also increasingly shifted away from primarily literary pursuits and toward the study and practice of morals in economic and political life.

As regards the second theme of the blurring of the boundaries between “religion” and “secular” that seems to characterize applications of the tradition of self-cultivation to Japanese economic life, Helen HARDACRE has pointed out the fundamental parallels between the ideas of self-cultivation in the New Religions and the *michi* of secular society (1986, pp. 27, 192). Given this, the separation between nominally “religious” and “secular” applications of the tradition of self-cultivation become even narrower than before. This seems to raise two questions. What do such parallels mean for the use of the words “religious” and “secular” in Japan? In other words, when “religious” practices are part of the training and indoctrination of numerous large and small companies in a modern industrial democracy like Japan, what does this mean for a definition of “religious” and “secular” in the Japanese context? Is there a need to redefine our use of these terms so that Japanese companies themselves might be seen as quasi-religious groups along with the traditional religions of Buddhism and Shinto, as well as the New Religions? Given that in many ways postwar companies have taken over some of the functions of prewar religious groups in providing a religious ethic of “self-transcendence” through spiritual meaningful labor in a company, if work in a company may require a truly “religious” devotion, do we not need to consider at least some Japanese companies as “religious organizations”? Second, if the above is true, then what does this imply in terms of a possible reevaluation of the so-called New Religions as being the predominant phenomenon of the postwar Japanese religious environment? In other words, do we not need to consider the “religious” practices of Japanese corporations as being perhaps equally important as major post–World War II “religious” phenomena?<sup>13</sup> These, of

<sup>13</sup> Ernest GUNDLING (1995) makes a similar point in his dissertation.

course, are not questions that can be fully addressed here. They do, however, stake out the issue: the need for a fundamental reevaluation of the boundary between “religious” and “secular” in our study of religious phenomena in modern Japan.

In this regard, the concept of “diffused” versus “institutional” forms of religion (YANG 1961, pp. 294–340) may be an appropriate way of beginning this new understanding of postwar Japanese religious phenomena. If the tradition of self-cultivation in Japanese economic life is a good example of this “diffused” form of religion, and one that is no less important for our overall understanding of religious life in modern Japan than most previous studies of institutional forms of Japanese religion, then further studies of such “diffused religiosity” within pre- and postwar Japanese economic life need to be done. This paper hopefully has offered some suggestions as to how such a project might be approached.

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