

Unspeakable Things

Sai On's Ambivalent Critique of Language and Buddhism

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This article examines Sai On's understanding of language and its correspondence with reality within the context of Confucianism, Buddhism, and the politics of eighteenth-century Ryukyu. Well aware of the limitations of language in conveying profound metaphysical truths, Sai On criticized Buddhists for their alleged erudition while displaying considerable rhetorical skill and erudition himself. Though a critic of Buddhism, Sai On's writings suggest a strong Zen influence. Like most other Confucians, he accepted the Buddhist-inspired understanding of a material world whose basis was constant change and sought to create a stable society by mastering the principles of change. The ambivalence in Sai On's critique of language use and Buddhism is in part a reflection of a broader problem many Confucians experienced in dealing with foundations and change, and in reconciling Buddhist and Confucian truths.

SAI ON 蔡温 (1682–1761), CONFUCIAN scholar and political reformer, was the most important shaper of the Ryukyu kingdom's character and institutions during its *kinsei* 近世 period (1609–1879). Forcibly annexed by Japan in 1879, the territory that once comprised Ryukyu is now Okinawa Prefecture. The precise status of *kinsei* Ryukyu is debatable, often emotionally so, owing to competing Japanese and Okinawan/Ryukyuan nationalisms. That *kinsei* Ryukyu was under significant Japanese domination, however, cannot be denied. More specifically, the king of Ryukyu was a de facto vassal of the daimyō of Satsuma, who invaded the islands in 1609. But *kinsei* Ryukyu also had strong ties with China, maintaining tributary relations for 500 years, from 1372 through 1872. Indeed, the *kinsei* period was a time of increasing Chinese influence in the realms of scholarship, state cere-

* Note concerning romanization: Sai On and other Ryukuans typically wrote in both Japanese (usually *sōrōbun*) and classical Chinese. Romanized terms in quoted passages reflect the original language of the text.

monial, and state religious policies, with Chinese cultural forms gradually replacing Japanese cultural forms within the upper strata of society (TOMIYAMA 1992). Although connected in formal ways with both China and Japan, the king and his officials administered Ryukyu's internal affairs, albeit within parameters dictated by those connections.

Sai On's political career began in 1711 at age thirty, when he became tutor to Crown Prince Shō Kei 尚敬 (r. 1712–1752). When Shō Kei ascended the throne the next year, Sai On continued to assist the young monarch in several capacities. Capable, confident, and a shrewd politician, Sai On soon became the most powerful figure in the Ryukyu government. Until his retirement from official life in 1751, he pursued a wide range of political and administrative reforms, many designed to revitalize Ryukyu's economy. Sai On also promoted Confucianism both as a personal creed and as a state ideology. By the time of his death, Ryukyu's government had become thoroughly "Confucianized," as reflected in its laws and rituals, and in the basis on which officials rose through the ranks.

Although often successful in his political programs, Sai On faced opposition throughout his tenure in office. This opposition came from the aristocrats of Shuri 首里, the capital, who saw their interests threatened by Sai On's political agenda. Sai On and his supporters came from Kumemura 久米村, an area adjacent to Shuri settled by Chinese immigrants in the fourteenth century, which served as Ryukyu's center for Chinese studies and diplomacy. By Sai On's time, Confucian studies comprised the core curriculum in Kumemura, with the Cheng-Zhu 程朱 variety becoming increasingly influential. On the other hand, Japanese Buddhism, particularly Shingon and Rinzaï Zen, continued to inform the hearts and minds of the Shuri aristocrats. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Sai On devoted a great deal of energy to criticizing Buddhism.

This critique of Buddhism had many dimensions, a few of which are examined here. Despite his strong anti-Buddhist rhetoric, Sai On's attitude toward Buddhism was ambivalent. Influenced by the Three Teachings 三教 syncretism then flourishing in southeast coastal China (Ryukyu's base of operations in China was Fujian), Sai On did not deny the ultimate validity of Buddhism, particularly in its meditative varieties such as Zen. He criticized popular Buddhist practices and beliefs as baseless superstition, albeit superstition that once served the useful purpose (as *upāya*, "skill in means") of frightening the residents of ancient India into decent behavior. Zen meditation, he claimed, while effective for a few outstanding persons, is impractical for the vast majority. Sai On praised Śākyamuni as a sage on a par with any in

China, including Confucius, and repeatedly affirmed that Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism ultimately address the same profound truth. As this truth is too profound to describe in words, Sai On distrusted attempts to do so. This distrust engendered both praise and blame for Buddhism, depending on the context.

The following dialogue from *Suoweng pianyan* 袁翁片言 [Conversations with a rustic old man] is a typical example of Sai On's understanding of the limits of language:

Two members of the aristocracy and a Buddhist monk visited the old man. There was a plum tree in front of his thatched hut, and its flowers were in full bloom, looking like snow. "How beautiful! How beautiful!" exclaimed the aristocrats.

The old man asked, "Where is true beauty located?"

One aristocrat said, "It's in the flower."

The other said, "It's in the eye."

The monk said, "It's in the mind-and-heart [*xin* 心]."

The old man faced the three and said, "You aristocrats are like rustics, and you [monk] are a clever talker. True beauty is in none of those places."

The monk spoke out and asked, "Where, then, is true beauty to be found?"

The old man said, "That which is counterfeit [*wei* 偽] is to be found after one speaks. That which is genuine [*cheng* 誠] is to be found before words." (SOZS, p. 26)

The plum blossoms make themselves manifest to our senses, and we can utter words in an attempt to convey the resulting impression to others. Sai On, however, argues via the old man's words that the true essence of beauty is found at the level where subject (heart-and-mind/eye) and object (flower) are united. This level of reality extends beyond the descriptive power of human speech. So to speak of beauty results, at best, in an incomplete imitation (Ch. *wei*, Jp. *itsuwari*) of the actual beauty achieved by the interpenetrating unity (Ch. *cheng*, Jp. *makoto*) of subject and object.

Sai On's distrust of language fell into two broad categories, each reflecting an aspect of its inherent counterfeit (*wei*) qualities: 1) the inability of words properly to represent profound metaphysical truths, and 2) the alleged tendency of the literary arts to favor aesthetics over practical utility. He regarded both of these problems with language as potentially dangerous because of their power to distract people from more important and productive pursuits. This paper examines Sai On's ambivalent views of language and Buddhism, an important dimension of Ryukyuan intellectual and religious history that scholars

of Ryukyu have thus far overlooked. Sai On was not unique in his views, and this inquiry attempts to shed some light on broader issues in Confucian thought and discourse.

The Confucian Plow and Buddhist Empty Talk

A master of rhetoric, Sai On often made use of metaphysical points in his arguments even as he claimed to be disinterested in metaphysics. "My Confucianism," he wrote, "is mainly about teaching fundamental, down-to-earth matters and rarely deals with metaphysics. It is the tendency of Daoists and Buddhists never to tire of discussing metaphysics" (SOZS, p. 37). Such claims notwithstanding, however, Sai On and other Confucians engaged in extended metaphysical discussions no less than did Buddhists or Daoists. Claiming that a proclivity to discuss what cannot be explained in words is a problem peculiar to Buddhism and Daoism was a rhetorical strategy to discredit Buddhist teachings. Sai On rationalized his own metaphysical discussions as necessary correctives to false Buddhist claims.

The following passage from *Conversations with a Rustic Old Man* illustrates the relationship between language and metaphysics using concrete metaphors. A Buddhist monk has asked the question, "The myriad religious teachings [*wanfa* 万法] return to a single essence. Do you know that essence?" The old man's answer raises epistemological issues about apprehending this essence:

It is easy to explain with the mouth, but difficult to comprehend with the mind-and-heart. Consequently, worldly monks are all capable of explaining it, but this is a verbal explanation. If the mind-and-heart does not apprehend it, this so-called "single essence" is like a valuable treasure in the house next door that one does not have. It is like blind men gathered to discuss the appearance of the light of the sun and the moon. How can we possibly say that their vision is true? (SOZS, p. 26)

There is no disputing the existence of a common essence at the core of Buddhist, Confucian, and other teachings. The problem is that the words of "worldly monks," or any one else, are inadequate to describe it. As in the passage about beauty, a "true vision" must extend beyond the world of words.

For Sai On, it was the concrete rules of Confucian morality that would reform Ryukyuan society. His *Go-kyōjō* 御教条 [Articles of instruction], which the royal government promulgated as law, is a good example of his stress on the basics. *Articles of Instruction* includes such topics as relations between husband and wife, the duties of vari-

ous occupational groups, and the harmful effects of drunkenness. It was to matters such as these, argued Sai On, that most Ryukyuan should devote their energies.

Because Confucian norms provide tangible guidelines for proper behavior, even those lacking intellectual sophistication could readily comprehend them. The following dialogue is an example of Sai On's portrayal of the relative ease of practice of Confucianism and Buddhism:

There was a Buddhist temple in the forest. The old man passed by the gate carrying a plow. A monk saw him and said, "Isn't that plow the old man is carrying heavy?"

The old man said, "What I carry is a plow. How can it be called heavy?" What the monk carries is all things [*wu* 物], and its weight is without limit. Why don't you cast them off and take up my plow?"

The monk was unable to reply. (SOZS, p. 25)

Sai On repeatedly portrayed most Buddhists as enamored of sophisticated metaphysical theories purporting to elucidate all phenomena, and of meditative techniques directed at penetrating directly to the essence of the world's external manifestations. Such theories and practices, however, are well beyond the abilities of most people, indeed, even most monks. By contrast, the Confucian Way, for which the plow is a metaphor, employs methods anyone can follow. In this and many other dialogues in *Conversations with a Rustic Old Man*, Sai On underscores the truth of the old man's points by portraying his opponents as suddenly becoming speechless, as was the monk at the suggestion he take up the Confucian plow. The sudden onset of speechlessness suggests a Zen-like enlightenment experience as a result of dialogue with the old man. In this way, Sai On rhetorically linked the absence of words with the realization of truth. But, of course, words in the form of the dialogue served as the instrument by which the old man brought about his opponents' realization of the limits of words.

Thus far we have seen two problems with the alleged Buddhist proclivity for metaphysical theorizing. First, because language cannot fully describe profound metaphysical truths, to speak of the unspeakable is to create falsehood. The second problem follows from the first: such false talk is not merely incorrect or useless but often positively harmful. At best, lengthy discussion of metaphysical topics wastes time and energy better spent on more productive endeavors. At worst, it leads people astray, obstructing their proper moral development:

The mind-and-heart penetrates that which is spiritual and that which is subtle. So even for a dull-witted person, when he hears something of [Buddhist doctrines], there is a part of his mind-and-heart that responds to them. There is the illusion of understanding, but this illusory “understanding” is all provisional. It is not the truth. Novice learners today often regard what is provisional as the truth. How could this be substantive learning [*shixue* 实学]? (SOZS, p. 33)

The words of Buddhist metaphysical theories mimic cosmic truths. These truths exist in each person’s mind-and-heart, which contains the entire cosmic pattern (Ch. *li*, Jp. *ri* 理) in microcosm. The deceptively false (*wei* in the dialogue on beauty, *xuhuo* 虚惑 in several other dialogues) words of the Buddhists, therefore, hinder concrete moral training of the mind-and-heart. Without this Confucian training, most people would never apprehend the truth that is already within them (*cheng* in the dialogue on beauty).

Language and the Manifest World of Oppositions

For Sai On, it was not the case that words are inherently unreliable or deceptive. The problem was language being able to represent only a limited range of phenomena. Profound religious truths extend beyond that range. In Sai On’s view, most people exist at a relatively low level of moral and spiritual development. They comprehend only tangible matters, which are fully describable in language. A small minority of advanced individuals, however, understand profound religious truths, not merely as verbiage, but with their entire being. These advanced persons might even communicate their understanding, but the method includes non-linguistic devices or the use of language in unconventional ways.

Sai On often attacked the hypocrisy and ignorance of glib-tongued Buddhist monks. At the same time, he acknowledged that some monks have acquired deep insights into the true nature of reality. Sai On sometimes contrasted the sophistication of these superior monks with the relative simplicity of Confucian aristocrats whose thinking was confined to the realms describable in ordinary language:

The old man and an aristocrat paid a visit to a mountain temple. In the shadow of a pine, they saw an old monk preparing tea and drinking it by himself as if nobody else was there. The aristocrat approached, bowed, and said, “How can you be so rude when guests come?”

The monk said, “Who is a guest and who is a host? What is ceremonial courtesy [*li* 礼] and what is rudeness?”

The aristocrat said, “He who comes is a guest, and he who is sitting is a host.”

The monk said, “Is there actually a distinction between coming and sitting? Are guests and hosts really two different entities?”

The aristocrat could not answer.

The old man said, “The monk is indeed a monk and the aristocrat is indeed an aristocrat. The words of aristocrats are heard in all places. The words of monks are silent and voiceless.”

The monk turned his head and smiled. (SOZS, p. 34)

The Confucian social norms and rules of courtesy within everyone’s grasp necessarily involve making distinctions, in this case host versus guest. Language, too, depends on distinctions to produce meaning. Meaning for the aristocrat derives from the opposition of clearly-defined categories. It is in this realm of oppositions, the manifest world, that words effectively communicate truths. In the dialogue above, however, the monk has transcended the dual categories of the manifest world.

A deeper level of reality unifies and subsumes the distinctions of the manifest world. In the dialogue above, the monk comprehends this level of reality to the bafflement of the comparatively simple-minded aristocrat. “The aristocrat could not answer” when faced with someone who had transcended distinctions such as hosts versus guests. Because ordinary language cannot describe this unified level of reality, the monk uses unconventional behavior, gestures, and seemingly senseless talk in an attempt to undermine the aristocrat’s certainty about categories and distinctions.

Sai On did not explicitly analyze the mechanism of language’s communicative function. He seems nevertheless to have had an intuitive understanding that ordinary verbal communication depends on making distinctions between polar or binary opposites. The limits of language derive from its reliance on difference instead of unity. The unity of the world beyond or above forms renders ordinary language inoperable.

The Dregs of Words

Metaphysical discussion was not the only problematic use of language for Sai On. He also alleged that practitioners of the literary arts tend

to privilege the aesthetic effect of words over practical utility. Although not always problematic, aesthetically pleasing words, Sai On argued, have the power to eclipse or obscure substantive moral, political, or scientific instruction. Typical examples of aesthetic language include song, poetry, and perhaps fiction, and Sai On indeed regarded these forms of literature as potentially problematic. He was particularly concerned with literature written in classical Chinese. Not only was classical Chinese the language of the Confucian classics, it was a foreign language Ryukyuan found more difficult to master than Ryukyu's other major foreign language, Japanese.

Because Kumemura was Ryukyu's window to China, its male residents received regular government stipends to study Chinese language, thought, literature, and diplomatic protocol and other ritual forms. For a resident of Kumemura to receive the esteem of his peers, he needed to demonstrate mastery of Chinese high culture, particularly Chinese composition. This mastery was no easy task, as Sai On acknowledged, and residents of Kumemura often simply copied pre-existing models when composing Chinese (SOZS, p. 83), plugging formulaic units of content, a quotation from a Confucian classic for example, into an equally formulaic grammatical structure. Success in these pursuits resulted in compositions conveying the appearance of deep erudition, though not necessarily its substance. Perhaps the best example of Sai On's ambivalent view of literary pursuits comes from his autobiography.

Like so many of his other essays, Sai On's autobiography emphasizes the value of unflagging effort in the cultivation of virtue and the material advancement of Ryukyuan society. Late in life, he "selected" incidents from his past to preserve as a model for the edification of subsequent generations. These incidents depict a Sai On who lived the theme of overcoming adversity through hard work. Several key incidents are of dubious authenticity, since the account in the autobiography is not corroborated by any other sources. The didactic effect of these incidents also seems too close a match with the key points in Sai On's other essays to be reliable as facts about his life. It is more appropriate, therefore, to regard the "autobiography," at least in part, as an essay cast in autobiographical form for persuasive effect.

Approximately one third of the autobiography describes an alleged encounter between Sai On and a scholarly recluse in Fujian Province, where Sai On had gone to study at age twenty-seven. By this point in his career he had attained the highest scholarly distinction available in Ryukyu and was confident of his erudition. One day the head monk of a temple Sai On was visiting urged him to talk with a certain

recluse then sojourning at the temple. Sai On saw the recluse several times, once composing an impromptu poem that the recluse praised lavishly. Knowing his poem was of no special merit, Sai On became reluctant to spend more time with the recluse, but the head monk urged one last visit.

Sai On agreed, and, unlike previous visits, this time the recluse was highly critical. He accused Sai On of having wasted his time and education on useless frills and characterized him as a disgrace to himself and his country:

The Four Books and the Six Classics and the other wise writings are all about making the will sincere [*sei'i* 誠意] and governing the country [*chikoku* 治国]. You, however, have forgotten the great function of making the will sincere and governing the country. Instead you put all your effort into reading books and writing literature for your amusement. You have forgotten yourself and your country, and, in the final analysis, are inferior to a craftsman. (SOZS, p. 107)

According to the recluse, scholarship should aid personal moral rectification (“making the will sincere,” a key term from the *Great Learning*), which in turn leads to effective governing (also from the *Great Learning*). Sai On undoubtedly saw himself as far superior to a craftsman, but a craftsman produces something of value. According to the recluse, Sai On’s scholarship served no purpose and was simply a source of pride and recreation. Such “scholarship” is not learning, said the recluse, but merely “the dregs of words” (*moji no kasu* 文字の糟粕).

Shocked by what seemed to him an outrageous accusation, Sai On tried to defend himself. “Are you familiar with the *Analects*?” asked the recluse. The reply, “Of course! I have carefully read all the Four Books and Six Classics,” initiated the following dialogue about *Analects* 1:5:

Recluse: “What is the true meaning of this [passage]? Please explain the true meaning of the characters *jing shi* 敬事 [reverent or mindful service].”

Sai On: “Concerning the way of government, *jing shi* is concentration so as not to lack precision, that is, to be mindful while serving [in office].”

Recluse: “Regarding procedures for such concentration, what specific steps would you take?”

Sai On: “To love others.”

The recluse burst out laughing at Sai On’s answer and continued questioning:

Recluse: “What sorts of words are ‘loving others’?”

Sai On: “What I mean by ‘loving others’ is that in any case of putting the correct way into practice, one extends benevolence to a country’s people.”

Recluse: “By what means would you endeavor to ‘extend benevolence’?”

At this point, reminiscent of many characters in *Conversations with a Rustic Old Man*, Sai On “could not speak.” Exasperated by queries he could not answer in concrete terms, Sai On was forced to agree with the recluse’s unflattering assessment. According to the autobiography, Sai On begged the recluse to instruct him and spent five months as his student (SOZS, p. 107).

Delighting in the “dregs of words” uses time and energy that could be spent pursuing real learning. The ultimate test of any piece of scholarship, therefore, is its usefulness in improving moral cultivation, as Sai On explained in *Suxi yaolun* 俗習要論 [Essential discussion of popular customs]:

Concerning effort in scholarship, such training must begin with the characters “making the will sincere.” If such efforts come to fruition, then appropriateness [*yi* 義] and the cosmic pattern [*li* 理] will be clarified, one’s true talent will become manifest, and one will be on a par with those who are of great use to society. Why do worldly scholars endeavor pointlessly to read books and write compositions? Even if one makes a name for himself in the literary arts, if he covets profit, loves fame, and so forth, he is no different from a common person. Could this really be what it means to cultivate learning?

(SOZS, pp. 155–56)

The close match with the account of the recluse in the autobiography should be obvious.

In criticizing empty Buddhist talk, Sai On pointed to the limits of the effectiveness of language. He explicitly and implicitly argued for the restriction of language use to its proper arena, the manifest world. In criticizing those who pursue the “dregs of words,” “pointlessly reading books and writing compositions,” Sai On sought to reduce enthusiasm for one of the most effective qualities of language: its ability to entertain, embellish, and affect the emotions. Language, he argued, should be a means of acquiring knowledge necessary to inform moral cultivation and government service, not an artistic form pursued for its own sake.

The Context of East Asian Confucianism

We now examine select aspects of language use in the broader tradition of East Asian Confucianism. The term “Confucianism” is terribly difficult to define, as is its subset category “Neo-Confucianism.” It is important to note that at no time and in no place was Confucianism a monolithic entity. In some times and places different varieties of Confucianism functioned as ideology associated with a state or certain social classes. Even in these instances, however, Confucianism was rarely a static, stable ideology. Critics of an established order, for example, often spoke out against it in the name and in the vocabulary of the very Confucian ideology that supposedly undergirded the object of their criticism. Confucianism in various forms also served religious functions, enhancing the value and meaning of individual and collective lives. The terms of Confucian discourse, its role in social and governmental structures, its religious roles, the particular problems it addressed, and the possibilities for solutions to those problems varied as a function of different individuals, time periods, and countries or societies (China, Japan, Ryukyu, Korea, Vietnam). But despite the vast diversity of Confucianism, it is possible to discern a few broad points of commonality that apply to most instances of Confucian discourse.

Confucian discourse revolved around sets of dyadic terms. The terms comprising each dyad opposed each other, but it is important to specify the nature of this opposition. It was not an opposition of the dualistic categories (e.g., good vs. evil; subject vs. object) that have exerted a strong influence on many European traditions of thought particularly after Descartes. The distinguishing feature of dualistic opposition is that each component of the pair has an *a priori*, independent existence. The relationship obtaining between Confucian dyadic terms, on the other hand, is typically described as polar. In polar opposition, the contrasting terms represent two extremes of a unified continuum. Their opposition is a matter of relative degree. Most importantly, each term in the polarity has meaning only with reference to the other. Neither has an *a priori* ontological status. The two terms of the Confucian dyad, therefore, are mutually dependent, not mutually exclusive.

One important Confucian polarity was that of *xu* (Jp. *kyo* 虚, roughly “emptiness”) versus *shi* (Jp. *jitsu* 実, roughly “substance”). *Shi* typically appears in the compound *shixue* (Jp. *jitsugaku* 実学), often translated as “practical learning.” Though not necessarily incorrect in all cases, using the English word “practical” to translate *shi* can lead to misunderstanding. “Practical” is inappropriate insofar as it suggests a

dualistic opposition between theory and practice or insofar as it suggests empirical investigation in European traditions of science and positivism. To avoid such associations, I translate *shi* as “substantive” and *shixue* as “substantive learning.”

Sai On’s statement quoted previously, “Novice learners today often regard what is provisional as the truth. How could this be substantive learning [*shixue*]?” reveals one way he employed the term *shi*. Recall that “provisional” here refers to and characterizes Buddhist discussion of metaphysics. By contrasting “provisional” with *shi*, Sai On effectively relegated Buddhist metaphysical discussion to the realm of *xu* (emptiness, lacking in substance). Because *xu* and *shi* do not imply dualistic opposition, however, the realm of *xu* is not nothing. On the contrary, it is the realm of unity undergirding the diverse forms (Ch. *wanwu*; Jp. *banbutsu* 万物) of the manifest world.¹ *Shi* and *xu* correspond respectively with the realms describable in language and those beyond language. Sai On consistently characterized that which can be described in language as *shi*. He also saw the realm of *xu* as important, criticizing only attempts to represent it in language. While necessity may occasionally dictate the use of language to approximate *xu*, Sai On urged speakers and listeners always to keep the provisional nature of such usage in mind. He argued that as a practical matter, most people would be better off concentrating on substantive (*shi*) affairs.

Other major Confucian scholars expressed views of language similar to those of Sai On. In the following passage, for example, the Japanese scholar Yamaga Sokō 山鹿素行 (1622–1685) describes the role of language, employing the terminology of the *Great Learning*:

The teachings of the sages consist solely in the realm of daily things and affairs ... and in making one’s moral authority manifest through the extension of knowledge and the investigation of things. Therefore, the sages Fu Xi, Shen Nong, Huang Di, Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, Wen, Wu, [the Duke of] Zhou, and Confucius did not establish any other method than this. Furthermore, their way was not characterized by the cacophony of excessive speech.

(*Yamaga gorui* 山鹿語類 [Classified conversations of Yamaga],
TAHARA and MORIMOTO 1970, p. 236)

Although Yamaga does not explicitly use the terms *jitsu* (*shi*) and *kyo*

¹ Zhou Dunyi’s Daoist-inspired “Explanation of the Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate” 大極圖說 begins: “The Ultimate of Non-substance and also the Supreme Ultimate!” Although “Non-substance” here is *wu* (Jp. *mu* 無), preferred by Daoists, it is synonymous with *xu* in this context. Zhu Xi took Zhou’s explanation as the starting point of his metaphysics, as did Sai On.

(*xu*), his view of language otherwise resembles that of Sai On. Like Sai On, Yamaga situates the Confucian Way in the manifest world. “Excessive” in the phrase “cacophony of excessive speech,” here, and in the context of Yamaga’s general dislike of metaphysical speculation, probably indicates talking about what is beyond the “realm of daily things and affairs.” At the very least, Yamaga shows a distrust of language. “The way of heaven and earth and the teachings of the sages,” he said elsewhere, “is not conveyed by excessive speech, nor by exotic theories and artifice” (*Seikyō yōroku* 聖教要録 [Essential record of the sages’ teaching], TAHARA and MORIMOTO 1970, p. 28). Surely Yamaga would have found Sai On’s “old man” and his Confucian plow appealing.

Suspicion of “excessive speech,” “elaborate theories,” and the like was a common theme in the writings of many Confucians, as was distrust of the literary arts. The influential Ming dynasty scholar Wang Yang-ming (1472–1529), for example, during a dialogue on “illuminating the [Confucian] doctrine,” said:

By illuminating the doctrine, do you mean returning to simplicity and purity and revealing them in concrete practice, or writing flowery speeches aimed at making noise and creating argument? The great disorder of the world is due to the popularity of conventional, meaningless literature and the decline of the actual practice of moral values. (CHAN 1962, p. 18)

Indulgence in the literary arts, said Wang, often leads to “valuing what is novel and strange, in order to mislead the common folks and gain fame” (CHAN 1962, p. 19). Again we see a tendency to regard language in the form of elaborate theories or aesthetically pleasing words as potentially harmful because of their tendency to lead people away from concrete moral effort in daily life.

Conclusions

Like most Confucians of his day, Sai On regarded the pattern of the cosmos as existing in a state of interpenetrating unity. Sometimes he spoke of this situation with eloquence. In *Conversations with a Rustic Old Man*, for example, a questioner asks about the existence of an eternal essence in humans that lives on after the body dies. Sai On replied, via the old man:

What you refer to as the “mysterious, unchanging body persisting unaltered” is what each corporeal human receives as his basis. That which each corporeal human receives as his basis is

but one, since the time before heaven and earth became differentiated and humans existed until the present day. This “one,” at its core, neither lives nor dies, neither grows nor degenerates. At its largest, there is nothing outside it; at its smallest, there is nothing inside it. There is no place from which to mimic or discuss it. Therefore, all I can do if forced to name it is to call it “one” [yi 一].... (SOZS, p. 73)

The “one” exists beyond dualisms like life and death, and therefore language—at least ordinary metaphoric language (“no place...to mimic or discuss”). But the “one” also unifies and subsumes these dual categories, constituting them as polarities. The ultimate point of the above passage in the context of the larger text is to refute the notion that one can live on after death in any sort of corporeal form, for example as a ghost. To argue against certain Buddhist teachings or popular religious beliefs that Sai On regarded as baseless superstition, he often spoke of metaphysics.

Sai On’s ambivalent, somewhat contradictory view of language and Buddhism points to a difficult issue with which nearly all Confucians of his day had to deal: the problem of foundations and change. Sai On’s thought and political activities can be plotted between two poles. On the one hand was a desire for stability, standardization, and proper form in the manifest world. The metaphysical counterpart of this stable manifest world was the “mysterious, unchanging body persisting unaltered,” in the passage above, or more generally, the cosmic pattern (*li*). On the other hand, Sai On took Buddhist-inspired notions of change quite seriously. He realized that the metaphysical “foundation” on which a stable society might be built was in a state of constant flux and change. This state of constant movement was a mysterious, “unchanging” principle built into the cosmic pattern, ultimately knowable only through intuition. The ontological truth of a “mysterious, unchanging body persisting unaltered,” with continuous movement and transformation as its “unchanging” principle, would always appear contradictory at the level of language.

Sai On had faith in the ability of himself and other Ryukyuan to grasp this cosmic pattern, master change, and take an active role in guiding Ryukyu’s destiny (Ch. *ming*, Jp. *mei* 命). He is particularly interesting as a Confucian because he addressed these matters directly, both in his writing and political practice, using the concept of *quan* (Jp. *ken* 權), “situational adaptation,” to bridge the gap between the manifest world and the fluid world of that which is “beyond forms” (SMITS 1996).

One of Sai On’s few extant poems, a verse about a river in the

Motobu peninsula of northern Okinawa, reads:

Standing alone on the banks of the Ōi River by the old ferry crossing,

独り栄河の古渡頭に立つ

The autumn maple leaves mix their color with the evening sun and reflect in the ripples of the current.

秋楓晩色, 波流に映ず

Look! Those who pass away are like this river.

請う看よ, 逝く者はみな是の如し

Day and night they hear its cold voice, never stopping for even a moment.

日俗, 寒声, 暫くも留まらず

(SHIMAJIRI and UEZATO 1990, p. 101)

Reminiscent of the famous opening passage of Kamo-no-Chōmei's *Hōjōki* 方丈記, this poem and many of Sai On's other writings placed great emphasis on unceasing transformation in nature (and therefore, necessarily, society). They did so, however, not to encourage Ryukyans to embrace change as an end in itself but to master the principles of change to create a stable and prosperous society. Sai On's goal, and that of many other Confucians, was to create a stable edifice on an ever-changing "foundation." This fluid "foundation," of course, is an important Buddhist- (and to a lesser extent Daoist-) inspired element in Confucianism.

Sai On's ambivalent view of language and Buddhism is a reflection of the broader Confucian problem of foundations and change. Further exploration of this problem in "post-Buddhist" Confucianism is likely lead to fruitful insights into East Asian thought and religion.

ABBREVIATION

SOZS *Sai On zenshū* 蔡温全集 [Complete works of Sai On], one volume. Sakihama Shūmei 崎濱秀明, ed. Tokyo: Honpō Shoseki, 1984.

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