

Experience and Identity

Umaretsuki in the Writings of Motoori Norinaga

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Motoori Norinaga (本居宣長 1730–1801) was a leading scholar of *kokugaku* 國學 (National Learning) in Edo-period Japan. He is best remembered for his commentaries on Japanese classics, *Genji monogatari tama no ogushi* (源氏物語玉の小櫛) and *Kojiki den* (古事記傳), each of which contains a critique of *karagokoro* 漢意 (Chinese-mindedness). Norinaga's aim was construct for Japan a cultural identity independent of China by restoring a spirit contained in Japanese tradition.

In this essay, I shall focus on Norinaga's understanding view of human nature (*saga* 性) and Japanese identity. In particular, I will consider his response to *karagokoro* as reflected in his essay *Shun-an zuibitsu* (舜庵隨筆), which contains a comprehensive account of theories of human nature in China and Japan up to that time.

THE NOTION OF *UMARETSUKI*

We begin with the notion of *umaretsuki* (“possessed from birth”), a term Norinaga took from Itō Jinsai (伊藤仁齋 1627–1705). In *Shun-an zuibitsu*, Norinaga writes that “Jinsai's comment, that one possesses *xing* (性, Jp. *sei*) by birth, is very interesting.... *Xing* is a matter of birth, and there is no need to speak of it as good or evil” (§718).

According to Norinaga, *umaretsuki* is something we possess by birth, and therefore it cannot be defined as either good or evil. In other words, *umaretsuki* is the natural condition of human beings, and therefore it is prior to judgments of good or evil. So what is the meaning of Norinaga's definition? To answer this question, we should first examine the historical construction of *xing shan* (性善) theory. In Confucian thought, the theory of *xing shan* began with Mengzi (孟子):

Everyone has a heart (心) that is sensitive to others.

The reason why I say that human beings all have hearts that will not bear others is this: suppose that someone suddenly saw a child about to fall into a well. In such a situation, everyone would have a feeling of alarm (怵惕) and compassion (惻隱). However, this is not because one tries to receive some good from the child's parents, nor because one wants to achieve fame among neighbors and friends, nor because one dislikes the sound of the child's cries.

From the beginning, Mengzi's explanation is about the human heart. He captures the tendency of humans to be good through the expressions "alarm" and "compassion." Mengzi's understanding of human nature is based on experiential induction. Although he used the notion of "heart," he did not define it through a transcendental epistemology. It is Zhu Xi's annotation to Mengzi that uses the concept of *li* (理):

Mr. Xie (謝) said that when we see a child about to fall into a well, all of us have a feeling of alarm, and this occurs in our real hearts (真心). This kind of heart is not attained by thought, nor hit upon by practice. It is just the nature of *tian li* (天理).

Since this does not have to do with *xing* but with "heart," we need to see how Mengzi and Zhu Xi define *xing shan*. Mengzi argues:

As for their *qing* (情), they can become good. This is what I mean by calling their nature "good." As for becoming evil, this is not the fault of their potential (才). Human beings all have the heart of compassion.

According to Mengzi, the good of human nature is the *potential* of being good, which may or may not be realized. But Zhu Xi asserted that human nature is good:

Qing is the activity of *xing*. Originally, a human being's *qing* could be good and could not act in an evil way. Accordingly, we can know that *xing* is good. (Mengzi 2.A.6.)

As a result, we know that the transcendental definition of human nature is not in Mengzi but in Zhu Xi. Although he also speaks of the same tension in human nature, Mengzi's definition does not have a transcendental logical basis. Therefore, we can say that Norinaga's definition of *umaretsuki* has two meanings. The first is the objection to the epistemology of Confucian thought, especially to that of Zhu Xi. The second, which is connected to the first, is the insistence on experiential rationalism, similar to Mengzi's explanation of the human heart.

In fact, Norinaga objects to Zhu Xi's commentary on *xing* and *qing*. According to Zhu Xi's theory, *xing* is wholly a good thing that we have by birth and it is related to *li* (理). *Li* is a cosmological law, and so man has the potential to become an ideal human being, a so-called *shengren* (聖人). But in order to become *shengren*, we have to restrain our desire of *qing*. Zhu Xi recommended replacing *qing* by returning to *xing*.

Zhu Xi's notion of *xing* is the potential of mankind, yet it also has the power to bind the greed of mankind. In any case, Norinaga's criticism of Zhu Xi's theory objects to the distinction between good (性) and evil (情). As a result, human nature has a strong sense of freedom. Thus *umaretsuki* may be seen as an experiential criticism of Zhu Xi's theory, and as such it denies various views of human nature, for example the view that humans are good or evil.

An important point to note here is that Norinaga does not deny the notion of *xing* itself. He only denies the logic according to which human nature is good. Does this mean that *umaretsuki* and *xing* have something in common? And if they do, could this open the possibility for a new East Asian thought?

JAPANESE IDENTITY OF SYMPATHY

Norinaga's *kokugaku*, which emphasized the freedom of human nature, was deeply related to traditional Japanese thought on nature (*shizen* 自然). This point of view was also shared by all the Japanese *kogaku*

(古學) scholars, especially Yamaga Sokō (山鹿素行 1622–1685), Itō Jinsai (伊藤仁斎 1627–1705), and Ogyū Sorai (荻生徂徠 1666–1728). Their common view forms one feature of modern Japanese thought, and so we can say that this is a classical form of Japanese identity.

Maruyama Masao (丸山眞男 1914–1996) has pointed out that *shizen* and *sakui* (作為 [artifice]) are features of both Japanese *kogaku* and *kokugaku*. He captured Zhu Xi’s viewpoint of nature as consisting of three points: first, it was regarded as a first step in human thought; second, Maruyama contrasted Zhu Xi’s concept of *li* and Sorai’s concept of *sakui* as transcendental substance versus human action; and thirdly, he contrasted the theories of Zhu Xi and Sorai as a difference between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* thinking (MARUYAMA 1952, 200–1; 217; 232–3).

Kurozumi Makoto (黒住 眞) criticizes Maruyama’s theory of Japanese modernization, arguing that it leaves a gap in relation to the idea of “experiential rationalism”:

One, Maruyama’s plan regarded Zhu Xi in the negative. He argued that Zhu Xi’s theory is completely unrelated to the process of modernization.

Two, it is clear that Maruyama’s reading of Zhu Xi was related to Japanese nationalism. His aim was to make Japan modern by becoming post-Asian.

Three, Maruyama planned to deny and overcome the old-fashioned system of Confucian thought in East Asia. This has the same roots of Norinaga’s aim of building a Japanese identity by criticizing Chinese Confucian thought. (KUROZUMI 2003, 167–8)

I agree with Kurozumi that we cannot accept Maruyama’s work as it is. However, it is true there are some aspects of *sakui* and experiential rationalism in Japanese thought. Kurozumi also wrote:

[Japanese Confucian thought in the Edo period was] considered very important, not as transcendental deduction but as individual and inductive judgement. It opened the way for positivism and experiential rationalism. (173)

To summarize this point, Norinaga’s *umaretsuki* belongs to a current of Japanese *kogaku* and experiential rationalism that is related to a

Japanese way of thinking or feeling (思い). Finally, it refined the notion of *awaremi* (哀れみ), meaning compassion. Earlier, I asked about the connection between *umaretsuki* and *xing* as a possibility for East Asian thought. To answer this question, it will be helpful to look at the notions of empathy and sympathy. First, we should consider the definition of both notions. Robert L. Katz writes:

It is true that in both sympathy and empathy we permit our feelings for others to become involved. The purpose of the two activities are different, however. In empathy we focus our attention on the feelings and the situation of the other person.... When we sympathize, we are preoccupied with the assumed essential bond between our own feelings and the feelings of others. We are not concerned so much with the objective reality and character of the other person's situation as with an analogy between him and ourselves. The analogy preempts our attention. The understanding of the other person is not our objective. (KATZ 1963, 8)

According to Katz, the most important distinction is the essential bond between oneself and others. This bond is an expression of the coexistence between the subjective and the objective. Katz warns us of the difficulties involved in empathy:

This distinction is important. Unless it is sharply made, it will be difficult to appreciate empathy as a professional tool in the arts and sciences. Practitioners of empathy are committed to objective knowledge of other personalities. (KATZ 1963, 8)

Martin L. Hoffman explains empathy from the viewpoint of moral development. He insists that empathy could be a principle of morality, but he also points out the risk of losing its connection to compassion in East Asian thought (HOFFMAN 2000). Where this is the case, the Japanese will need to reform their notion of empathy in the future.

We now need to examine the essential bond of *awaremi*. Naturally, this means questioning the logical leap of that experiential deduction. In other words, Norinaga's *kokugaku* was a kind of metaphysics. How could he have resorted to a metaphysical basis? To answer this question, it will be helpful to consider the aorist verb tense in the Japanese language.

THE AORIST IN JAPANESE

As noted above, *umaretsuki* is based on experiential rationalism, but it is also related to transcendental metaphysics. This is natural enough, given that birth is a precondition of *umaretsuki*. Norinaga's criticism of Zhu Xi's theory pointed out the aspects of transcendental metaphysics, only to insist then on a transcendental metaphysical basis as a precondition of *umaretsuki*. How could he explain this logical leap in his experiential rationalism? Here I refer to the first chapter, "Kaimyo," of the *Kojiki den*:

When the sky and earth were opened, the name of God in Takama-no-hara was Ame-no-minakanushi. Next was Takami-musubi-no-kami. Next, Kami-musubi-no-kami. All three Gods are all *hitori-gami* and *make* the body *hidden*. (MNZ 9: 121)

The very important point is "make the body *hidden*," (Jp. ミミヲカクシタマヒキ [*ki*]). Jumping to the conclusion, *ki* is a particle that indicates an aorist past tense. Fujii Sadakazu writes:

Likewise, *ki* was a particle for stating what has been seen. Therefore, it indicates a very high degree of certainty, like that of a witness... *Ki* is a particle used to report something that has been seen. (FUJII 1987, 288–90)

As we have seen, *umaretsuki* was based not only on experiential rationalism but also on transcendental metaphysics. Norinaga's *kokugaku* justified his transcendental metaphysics as an experiential fact by using the aorist tense, and his logical and identical leap was also clarified by the aorist tense. Yet it can be criticized based on his own transcendental metaphysics.

In fact, the possibility of *umaretsuki* provided a basis for Japanese nationalism in the Meiji period. For example, Uesugi Shinkichi (上杉愼吉 1878–1929) followed Norinaga's book *The Spirit of Rectification* (『直毘靈』) in a 1916 essay. In it he proposes that the idea of *umaretsuki* in the aorist tense has more power to bind desire than does the concept of *li* in Zhu Xi's theory. At the very least we can say that its binding force is as strong as the binding force of *li*.

If Norinaga's *kokugaku* thought was to be a method for accepting and digesting Chinese culture, it required a logical device that would correspond to Chinese thinking and enable us to understand it. It seems to me that today, too, we need to investigate the meaning of such a device and its problems. In other words, Norinaga's project suggests a possible way for East Asian philosophy to maintain its independence and at the same time coexist with other philosophies. It is not a question of favoring one over the other, but of a kind of independence through coexistence.

As mentioned above, however, Norinaga's *kokugaku* thought was often used as a basis for Japanese nationalism, the main point of contact being the idea of *awaremi*. Since *awaremi*, like *umaretsuki*, is grounded in the experiential world, we should examine the compassion of *awaremi*, a compassion of empathy or sympathy. In other words, does the compassion of *awaremi* have an essential bond or not?

In Inoue Tetsujirō (井上哲次郎 1856–1944), we also find connections to the experiential world, as evidenced in his concept of *kokutai* (国体):

The fundamental character of Japan came into existence naturally. It is not man-made, like many countries in Europe, especially those that have a republican system. (INOUE 1926, 2–4)

Almost all mythologies were originally produced by the imagination; even if Japanese mythology is not factual, it bears a close resemblance to ancient times, and so is considered to bear a relationship to the historical truth. (INOUE 1892, 24)

The important point to grasp here is the way national mythology is being understood. For Inoue, the logical basis of Japanese mythology lies in establishing close resemblances. This is a form of understanding based on experiential compassion, just as *awaremi* is. From this viewpoint, we are unable to see any essential bond in sympathy. It is a compassion lacking the potential to support the coexistence of the subjective and the objective.

In fact, Inoue does not hesitate to insist on the right of the nation to control the lives of its people (INOUE 1892). Does this reduce the potential of Norinaga's *kokugaku* thought, and in particular, of his notion of *umaretsuki*?

SYMPATHY IN EAST ASIAN THOUGHT

In reflecting on Norinaga's *kokugaku* thought in line with experiential rationalism, we need to question the experiential basis for defining "Japan" and "Japanese identity," and then to consider how experiential identity can be connected to independent coexistence. Accordingly, in what follows we shall discuss: (1) Norinaga's metaphysical criticism, (2) the importance of the aorist tense in Norinaga's annotations; and (3) a suggestion for an empiricist view of identity coexisting independently.

Umaretsuki is based on Japanese experiential rationalism. Feeling is the most experiential function of human nature. On the other hand, the same traits of transcendental metaphysics show up in *umaretsuki*. In this regard, it is like *xing* and the experiential function in *qing* in Zhu Xi's theory. In short, Zhu Xi and Norinaga share a common understanding and function regarding human nature.

What kind of potential may we anticipate here for East Asian thought? Zhu Xi and Norinaga's were similar in some respects, for example, in the strong forces they see binding human nature. The difference between them has to do with *li* and nation, though even here the same function of compassion in human nature is present: *ce yin* (惻隱) or *awaremi*.

I would like to suggest that we consider this common idea of sympathy as a potential for a new East Asian philosophy. Both *ce yin* and *awaremi* are related to transcendental metaphysics, but they are also experiential functions. Both are one's own feelings and at the same time are related to other people or objects. This function of feeling comes from one's own experience, but it also means that one can reflect on oneself, overcome oneself, and be open to others.

Deleuze defined the subjective as a "meditation and transcendence." He also explained the subjective as a "movement" of "overcoming and reflecting upon oneself" (DELEUZE 1953, 90). Sympathy is also an important concept in Deleuze's *Empiricism and Subject*, where he stresses the need to "expand on it" (27, 30). In the concepts of *ce yin* and *awaremi*, there is also a movement of "overcoming oneself and reflecting upon oneself." I believe that if we are able to clear up the problem of metaphysical binding in the concepts of *li* and nation, we could then turn to

the idea of sympathy in East Asian thought and use it to consider independent coexistence.

However, as mentioned above, we cannot define the concepts of *ce yin* and *awaremi* as sympathy. So how can we find an experiential possibility in them? Above all, how can we distinguish empathy and sympathy in the two? Finally, can we not change the emphasized concept of compassion into sympathy? What is required to do so?

Jullien points out Mengzi's theory of "heart" as a fundamental experience and compares it with Kant. He writes:

In a word, what is described in Mengzi is not a principle of morality, but an assurance of the existence of the request for morality within myself.... Responsibility as a fundamental bond with others exists before every experience. (JULLIEN 1995, 53-3)

In the case of the child and the well, Kant would view the feelings in one's heart as irrational. Jullien, in contrast, tries to re-read the experience of compassion as a fundamental experience. Jullien's immanence of morality and the idea of responsibility based on a fundamental relationship with others is what we have referred to as sympathy. We see the essential bond here in his notions of immanence and responsibility.

As stated above, *ce yin* and *awaremi* both belong to experiential compassion. We also saw a loss of the essential bond of sympathy. This is not because of the distinction between the two concepts, but because of Zhu Xi and Norinaga's logic of transcendental metaphysics. Accordingly, if, as a first step, we can eliminate deductive basis from experiential rationalism, we would be able to transform the empathy of compassion into sympathy. In the end, the potential of sympathy in East Asian thought is not yet a possibility but a task to be realized in the future through compassion towards the past.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, Norinaga's *umaretsuki* criticized the metaphysical logic of Zhu Xi's theory through experiential rationalism. But his logic of *umaretsuki* was also based on transcendental metaphysics.

We saw that his experiential rationalism is based on his use of the aorist tense, and that his concept of *umaretsuki* is related to the idea of sympathy or *awaremi*. This is the same feeling of *ce yin* that we find in Chinese Confucian thought.

Thus the theories of *xing* and *umaretsuki* are based on a common understanding of human nature. The only difference is between *li* and the aorist tense, between thinking about all of humanity and thinking about Japan, and between empathy and sympathy. I believe that the function of feeling in East Asian thought means to be related both to oneself and to others. Even if this does not suffice to define it as “sympathy,” I believe the idea has the potential to aid us in rethinking an experiential identity for East Asia in the twenty-first century.

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