

## “MIN’S LAMP IN NIPPON”: EZRA POUND AND JAPANESE NEO- CONFUCIANISM

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Ezra Pound’s contrast between a Western civilization corrupted, in his view, by the “Bellum ... perenne” waged by “usura” and an alternative social model based on Confucian ethics is apparent throughout *The Cantos* (“Canto 86” 19). Confucian thought is central to Pound’s dream of a more enlightened society. This centrality is neatly summarised in his response to T. S. Eliot’s question of what he believes: “I believe the *Ta Hio*,” Confucius’s *Da xue* (“Great Learning”), which he had translated in 1928 under that title and again as *The Great Digest* in 1951 (*Make It New* 18). Pound repeats this statement in Canto 88: “I believe the *Dai Gaku*,” this time with the Japanese reading of the characters (186). Pound’s interest in Confucian thought has already been masterfully treated in Feng Lan’s *Ezra Pound and Confucianism*. Lan does not, however, explore the role that Japanese neo-Confucianism played in Pound’s imagination of the Confucian tradition. As Pound put it in a wartime article, “Japan continued to preserve some of the best Chinese skills and customs when China had fallen into her decadence” (“Ezra Pound Asks” 6). Pound thus repeated a conventional Japanese view used to justify Japan’s invasion of China at that time. He also considered this cultural transmission to have occurred with Confucian thought. This article will break new ground by examining Pound’s encounters with Japanese neo-Confucianism. It will do so by discussing the significance of his reference to the Japanese neo-Confucian philosopher Nakae Tōju (1608-48) and its function within *Section: Rock-drill* as a contrast with a corrupted West; it will then trace the development of Tōju’s influential promotion of Wang

Yangming learning in Japan through to the famous samurai Saigō Takamori (1828-77), who inspired the *kenbu* (“sword-dance”) poem Pound translated as “The Sole Survivor” in his 1915 “Sword Dance and Spear Dance” translations. Saigō’s “honour” in defeat depicted in this poem seeks to exemplify Yangming’s neo-Confucian ethics of “virtuous action.”

Pound’s comparison of what he sees as the usurious West and the enlightened Confucian tradition is encapsulated in Canto 87 of *The Cantos*, a canto that forms a part of *Section: Rock-drill 85-95 de los Cantares* and first appeared in print in the Spring 1955 issue of the *Hudson Review*. After introducing the “perenne” war between “the usurer and any man who / wants to do a good job,” it observes the “Paideuma” of the United States in the nineteenth century “fading” before the canto turns eastwards (20). In the *Hudson Review* version, a section break precedes the following passage:

And after the year 1600 Nakae Toji  
carried Wai’ Ya’  
(name worn out in some dialects)  
Min’s lamp in Nippon.  
The total dirt that was Roosevelt,  
and the farce that was Churchill (20)

Carroll F. Terrell’s *A Companion to The Cantos of Ezra Pound* notes that “Pound got the name and the association from Carson Chang,” the Chinese politician and author then writing *The Development of Neo-Confucian Thought*, “who visited him at St. Elizabeths,” the psychiatric hospital in Washington DC where Pound was incarcerated between 1946 and 1958 (491). Terrell does not give the right name, however: the “Japanese philosopher known as ‘the Sage of Omi’” who “expounded the neo-Confucian philosophy of Wang Yang-ming,” the canto’s “Wai’ Ya’,” was in fact Nakae Tōju (491). Korenaga was his personal name, but his disciples named him after the wisteria trees (*tōju*) under which he lived and taught in the village of Ogawa, by Lake Biwa in Ōmi

Province, and after which he named his academy, the Tōju Shoin (Takayanagi 3-4).

The misspelling of Tōju's name in the canto likely did not come from Pound but from Chang, otherwise known as Zhang Junmai (1886-1969), a prominent Chinese politician and scholar of neo-Confucianism who had studied at Waseda University from 1906 to 1910 and left China after the establishment of Communist rule in 1949 for the United States, where he met Pound. In *The Development of Neo-Confucian Thought*, published in 1957, Chang explains the difference between the approaches of the Song-dynasty neo-Confucian philosopher "Chu Hsi," or Zhu Xi (1130-1200), and the Ming-dynasty neo-Confucian philosopher "Wang Shou-jen," or Wang Yangming (1472-1528). Zhu Xi, Chang writes, emphasises "reason" above all else as the way to becoming a sage; for Yangming, however, there is no distinction between the inborn intuition of right and wrong and "logical awareness" (54). Though it lost favour towards the end of the Ming dynasty in China, Yangming's approach was "transplanted to Japan" by "Nakae Toji":

As a reaction against Wang Shou-jen there was at the end of the Ming dynasty and during the Ch'ing dynasty a counter-movement: "Back to the Classics!" and "Back to Chu Hsi!" ... This "Back to Chu Hsi!" movement was only an aftermath and not the first crop of neo-Confucianism. It is interesting to note that while Wang Shou-jen's philosophy was on the decline in China, it was transplanted to Japan during the seventeenth century by Nakae Toji, and continued to the middle of the nineteenth century when some of its adherents took an active part in the Meiji Reformation. (55)

Chang's portrayal of the vanguard of neo-Confucian thought continuing in Japan while it declined in China itself bears comparison with the view of the broader cultural relationship between China and Japan that Pound had come across in 1913 in

Ernest Fenollosa's *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, which claims that China's decline began "in the sixteenth century of the Ming dynasty, after the transmissions of its best traditions to Ashikaga Japan" (Moody et al. 315; 2: 142).

The year Tōju first encountered Yangming's philosophy was 1640, when he read the latter's *Xing lihui tong* ("On Understanding Nature") and the *Yulu* ("Sayings") edited by Yangming's disciple, Wang Longxi (1498-1583). Tōju commented that he was "inspired" and "overjoyed by many things" in these works; four years later, he purchased an edition of the *Yangming quanji* ("Collected Works of Yangming"), describing it as a "blessing from heaven" (qtd. in Sakuma 64; translation mine). He was particularly drawn to Yangming's foregrounding of "virtuous action" (*dexing*) rather than "study" in acquiring sagehood (Takayanagi 37; translation mine). This encounter led Tōju to become the founder of what became known in Japan as *Yōmeigaku*, or "Yangming studies" (Takayanagi 52; translation mine). Pound's choice of the year "1600" suggests, however, that the canto seeks to associate Tōju's reception of Yangming's thought with the establishment of the Tokugawa shōgunate that year, as Pound would have known from his reading of Fenollosa's *Epochs* (2: 111). Pound would also have learned from it that the era's first shōgun, Tokugawa Ieyasu, brought in "a new spiritual force," a "liberal Confucianism" that was "taught in the forms descended from the Hangchow philosophers," that is, from Yangming and his followers (2: 115). The "great Confucian university at Yedo," later known as the Shōheikō, was founded in 1633 by Ieyasu's influential neo-Confucian adviser, Hayashi Razan (1583-1657), "for the education of the samurai," and so Tokugawa society, shaped by a neo-Confucian ethics, kept the peace for some two and a half centuries (2: 115).

That peace was broken by the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry's ships in Edo Bay on 8 July 1853 demanding that Japan either open up to trade with the United States or face naval attack. Canto 88 contrasts Tōju's carrying of "Min's lamp to Nippon" with this form of cultural interaction. It explores the motivations

underlying the “opening” of Japan to trade through Perry’s arrival, about which Pound read, as Terrell notes, in Brooks Adams’s *The New Empire* (Terrell 506). Canto 85, at the start of *Section: Rock-drill*, presents Confucius’s depiction in the *Shujing* (“Book of History”) of the Shang Dynasty under “Y Yin” (Yi Yin), which is “Not led of lusting, not of contriving / but is as the grass and tree” (488-89). Under the preceding Xia Dynasty, too, “beast and fish held their order, / Neither flood nor flame falling in excess” (489). The empire prospered in harmony with natural abundance. In Canto 88, however, the United States “bust the abundance” of its natural resources; they therefore had to “make war” in order to continue to “export”:

So that Perry “opened” Japan. (187)

The quotation marks around “opened” here suggest that, unlike the carrying of Yangming’s learning to Tōju, what Perry brought was not an “opening” but rather an extinguishing of “Min’s lamp,” a metaphor used throughout *The Cantos* for the transmission of enlightened thought. Pound’s moral condemnation of the motives for “opening” Japan is more explicitly apparent in the canto’s drafts, in which “that ~~was~~ Perry ‘opened’ Japan.” Though Adams sees the rise towards “American supremacy” as the result of “science” having “established a control over nature,” his account of Perry’s actions demonstrates his claim that “War is economic competition in its sharpest aspect” (xi; 113). The arrival of Perry’s ships caused “Terror on the shores” and “The immediate effect was war,” as a result of which the shōgunate fell (187-89).

Underlying Pound’s condemnation of the economic “lusting” that motivated the arrival of Perry’s ships in Japan was his knowledge of the neo-Confucian shōgunate’s generous patronage of the arts; the “war” that resulted in its overthrow brought this patronage to a halt. In *“Noh” or Accomplishment*, a collection of Fenollosa’s translations of and notes on Japanese nō plays which Pound had reprinted almost in its entirety in *The Translations of Ezra Pound* in 1953, Pound cites the Kanze nō actor Umewaka

Minoru's (1828-1909) account of his family ancestry, in which he relates how Umewaka Rokurō Ujimori "was called to the palace of Tokugawa Iyeyasu in the fourth year of Keicho [1599], and given a territory of 100 koku ... After that the family of Umewaka served the Tokugawa Shoguns with Noh for generations down to the revolution of Meiji (1868)" (216).<sup>1</sup> With the end of the shōgunate, however, the nō troupes suddenly lost nearly everything. Without Umewaka, "the art would have perished. He restored it through poverty and struggle, 'living in a poor house, in a poor street, in a kitchen, selling his clothes to buy masks and costumes from the sales of bankrupt companies, and using "kaiyu" for rice"' (215). When composing *Section: Rock-drill*, nō and Umewaka were on Pound's mind: he wished his translation of Sophocles's *Women of Trachis*, published in the Winter 1954 issue of *Hudson Review*, to be taken "to the Minoru [sic] if they can be persuaded to add it to their repertoire" (487). Nō's change in fortunes in the wake of the shōgunate's fall accords with Pound's contention throughout *The Cantos* that societies founded on Confucian principles allow the best art to flourish while usurocracies destroy it.

The entire samurai class likewise faced extinction with the end of the shōgunate. After they were barred from carrying swords in March 1876 and their stipends were converted to government bonds in August that year, the prominent samurai Saigō Takamori (1828-77) instigated a rebellion against the Meiji imperial army. Following some seven months of fighting, Saigō committed mass ritual suicide with his last remaining samurai comrades rather than surrender at Shiroyama on 24 September 1877 (Ravina 198 and 210). According to Mark Ravina, Saigō's primary motivation for preserving the samurai class was that it "epitomized honor and selfless valor" (199). Saigō had been trained in the appreciation of these values through his neo-Confucian education, an important constituent of the samurai ethic, as Kleitz observes (43). Like all

<sup>1</sup> Only Pound's reproduction of Fenollosa's score for the nō play *Hagoromo* is omitted in *The Translations of Ezra Pound* and *The Classic Noh Theatre of Japan*.

samurai in the Tokugawa period, he was taught the Confucian classics and learned to write classical Chinese poetry (*kanshi*) from an early age. In his early twenties he was influenced by the teachings of the Yangming scholar Itō Mōemon (1816-?). Itō introduced him to the works of Satō Issai (1772-1859), who had continued to study in the Japanese tradition of Yangming learning founded by Tōju despite the ban on it imposed from 1790 onwards (*Saigō Takamori zenshū* 6: 300). Saigō kept a notebook of more than a hundred of Issai's sayings (Ravina 38). A *jisei* ("death-poem") on Saigō's heroic last stand at Shiroyama began circulating soon after his death; because of his fame and his knowledge of *kanshi* composition, this poem was at first attributed to him and began appearing as such in several collections of *kenbu* ("sword-dances") published in the 1890s, when the Meiji government sought to instil a martial spirit among the populace in line with the national slogan, *fukoku kyōhei* ("enrich the nation, strengthen the military").

Among those published most recently before Itō's dance performances was Tanaka Shōjirō's 1913 collection, *Wakan rōgin shishū*. The poem is entitled "Saigō Takamori jisei" ("Saigō Takamori's death-poem") but not given an author:

孤軍奮鬪破圍還。  
一百里程壘壁間。  
我劍既摧吾馬斃。  
秋風埋骨故鄉山。

Fighting alone, I broke through the siege and returned.  
Through a hundred miles of fortress ramparts.  
My sword is already broken and my horse has fallen.  
In autumn wind, my bones are buried in home's mountain.  
(14; translation mine)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Hasebe Tsuyoshi for his kind assistance with translating this *kanshi* and providing further information on its context.

The “hundred miles of fortress ramparts” indicate the distance Saigō had to retreat through Kyūshū from the siege of Kumamoto Castle south to Kagoshima. It was eventually discovered that this *kanshi* was composed by one of his supporters in the 1877 rebellion, Nishi Dōsen (1836-1913). Like Saigō, Dōsen revered Yangming’s philosophy, as his contribution of *kanshi* to the journal *Yōmeigaku* (“Yangming Studies”) suggests (4). He had founded the *Nagasaki jiyū shimbun*, the first daily newspaper in Kyūshū, in 1877; the first version of the Saigō poem appeared in its pages (Nagashima 8-9). The poem commemorates Saigō’s putting into practice of the neo-Confucian “virtuous action” promoted by Yangming, whose lamp, as Pound’s Canto 87 records, Tōju carried to “Nippon.”

Following his reception of Fenollosa’s *nō* and Chinese poetry notes and translations from Fenollosa’s widow Mary, Pound had by the summer of 1915 produced most of his *nō* versions from Fenollosa’s translations and the collection *Cathay*. At this time, he was highly enthusiastic about *nō*, describing it as “unquestionably one of the great arts of the world, and possibly the most recondite” (“The Classical Stage” 201). By 6 April, Pound had met the Japanese dancer Itō Michio (1892-1961) and asked for help with translating *nō* plays (Itō 29). Itō told Pound he knew little about them but introduced him to Japanese acquaintances that did, including the painter Kume Tamijūrō (1893-1923) and the playwright Kōri Torahiko (1890-1924). The three of them performed *nō* for Pound in July 1915. Pound also befriended another Japanese, “Masirni Utchiyama” (Uchiyama Masami), from whose notes Pound translated a series of “Sword-Dance and Spear-Dance” poems. These were sung by Uchiyama, whose “voice booming ominous from behind the curtain” accompanied Itō’s *kenbu* (“sword-dance”) performances (“Sword-Dance” 54). A programme of these performances in Pound’s possession indicates that they took place in a “studio” at 1 Holland Lane, Melbury Road, Kensington, on 27 October, 2 and 7 November and featured the *kenbu* “‘Kogun Funto’ (the exhausted warrior),”

“‘Kawana kajima’ (the enemy, in the dawn),” and “‘Honoji’ (dance of the spear).” The last two are currently attributed to the poet and historian Rai Sanyō (1780-1832); the second was previously entitled “Fushikian Kizan wo utsu no zu” (“Scene of Fushikian Attacking Kizan”) (Tanaka Hirayoshi 10 and 13). Pound’s translations were eventually published in the December 1916 issue of *Future*. Although critics have praised these translations, with James Longenbach even comparing them to *Cathay* in their “subtle commentary on the war” raging in Europe, to date there has been no detailed discussion of them in comparison with their Japanese originals (201).

In his introduction to the translations in *Future*, Pound explains that these “sword-dances” were among those Itō performed at the Coliseum Theatre from 10-24 April 1915, soon after Pound met Itō. This suggests that Itō was Pound’s source for his encounter with these poems. Pound describes each *kenbu* as “a drama in miniature, having in its few lines of its text not only the crux of a play but almost the form and structure of full drama” (“Sword-Dance” 54). Pound’s title for the Saigō poem is changed to “The Sole Survivor” in *Future*. Pound responds to the regularity of the original’s rhymed *shichigon zekku* (“seven-character quatrain”) form with a division into four stanzas and the insistent repetition of two stresses in each but the final line:

A force cut off,  
Fighting hard,  
Shut around.

I burst the bonds,  
I alone,  
I returned,

Fleeing by night  
Through the crags of the border.

My sword is broken,

My horse is fallen.  
The hero drags his corpse to his native mountain. (“Sword-Dance” 55)

In its repeated insertion of the first-person singular pronoun, the translation foregrounds the hero’s “outstanding personality,” the phrase Pound used in a May 1915 article (“The Renaissance: III” 88). Though the original has a “force cut off” (*kogun*), it has no explicit pronoun for the action of “burst[ing] the bonds” (*kakomite*) or “return[ing]”; “I alone,” furthermore, has no equivalent in the Japanese. Pound’s choice is revealing: it accords with his veneration of the “outstanding” individual overcoming the darkness of immorality, as his account of Umewaka’s life based on Fenollosa’s notes also suggests; throughout *The Cantos*, these qualities are ascribed to personalities such as Lorenzo de’ Medici, Thomas Jefferson, and Benito Mussolini.

In the case of “The Sole Survivor” in particular, the “honour” of the “hero” is his primary attribute. In *Future*, Pound comments:

The last line is the only obscure one. It is, however, quite clear to a Japanese. The protagonist is the sole survivor of a force surrounded in the mountain passes. He has the right to die in his own country, but honour demands that he shall not survive his companions longer than that. He will kill himself as soon as his return journey is completed. (“Sword-Dance” 55)

Pound’s emphasis on the individual heroism of the “sole survivor” is again apparent here: in fact, Saigō descended Shiroyama towards the government troops along with a group of samurai comrades, including Kirino Toshiaki and Beppu Shinsuke (Ravina 4). It is on Shiroyama (“Castle Mountain” or “Castle Hill”), outside the castle walls of Kagoshima, the city of Saigō’s birth, that he makes his last stand, so that his “bones are buried” in his “home’s mountain” where they fought and died, rather than him surviving the battle and then making a separate “return

journey,” as Pound’s reading suggests. The “returning” (*kaeru*) in the Japanese version is, instead, that of Saigō’s troops to his hometown for their final battle after fighting with government forces all over Kyūshū. Nonetheless, the hero’s “honour” which “demands that he shall not survive his companions” is the neo-Confucian principle of loyalty to one’s comrades and to what Saigō described as their “noble cause,” the defence of the samurai class that had been trained in neo-Confucian thought, particularly that of Yangming after Tōju’s transmission of it to Japan (*Saigō Takamori zenshū* 6:533; translation mine).

Pound would have been especially moved by the Saigō poem because of the death, on 5 June 1915, of his close friend, the sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, at Neuville St Vaast on the Western Front. The shock of Gaudier-Brzeska’s death instigated Pound’s composition of what would become *The Cantos*. Indeed, its first drafts were written on the back of seven programmes for Itō’s “Sword-Dance” performances. “But what’s [*sic*] all this to us? the modern world...” the first draft begins, before it gives an account of a soldier who had enlisted to serve in the trenches. This is followed by the depiction of Gaudier-Brzeska’s death, “the best man killed in France / struck by a prussian bullet at St Vaast” (qtd. in Longenbach 187). The draft later also laments how, “Going at last, Japan [*sic*] turns European” (qtd. in Houwen 332):

Plain, manufactured, “well-taught” orientals,  
talking of Emerson and Hoffmansthal,  
Cezanne and Neitzche [*sic*]. (qtd. in Houwen 332)

The “Plain, manufactured, ‘well-taught’ orientals” line most likely refers not to “Itow or Tami Koumé,” as Christine Froula and Carrie J. Preston suggest, but to Kōri (Froula 131; Preston 48). In contrast with his friendly correspondence with Itō and Kume sustained over many years, Pound mentions Kōri only once, as “Takahama Kori,” in an 8 September 1915 letter to John Quinn, as Ewick observes (“Notes” 26). Pound describes him as Japan’s “Granville Barker,” a reference to Kōri’s flamboyantly Western dress sense

while living in London. Before coming to London, Kōri had published in *Shirakaba* a number of articles on Strauss's opera *Elektra*, whose libretto was written by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, an important influence on Kōri ("Erekutora"; "Kageki").<sup>3</sup> *Shirakaba* also featured several articles on Cézanne and Nietzsche (Bernard; Koizumi; "Sezannu"). For Pound, Kōri represented the disappearance of the "recondite" Japanese culture he had discovered in *hokku*, *nō*, and *kenbu*.

By contrast, Pound demonstrates his affection for Itō in a 25 September 1915 letter to his father: Itō has the features of a "samurai," unlike "the round moon faced type of Jap [*sic*]" (Moody et al. 353). The latter may also be Kōri, as photographs taken at the time suggest. In thinking of Itō as a "samurai," Pound would have thought of his "sword-dances" commemorating the neo-Confucian "honour" in battle of samurai such as Saigō Takamori. He thus always considered the "opening" of Japan to Western trade and the fall of the shōgunate as the tragic loss of a society that was based on "honour" and, as the case of *nō* showed him, generous patronage of the arts. The Meiji restoration and the end of the samurai class meant that Japan had, as Pound lamented, "turn[ed] european," imitating Western cultural as well as political and technological models. It is important to remember, however, that in his criticism of Japan's "opening" to Western trade, Pound does not advocate the national policy of isolation (*sakoku*) that the shōgunate imposed from 1639 to the Perry's arrival in 1853. Indeed, Canto 87 ascribes its two and a half centuries of relative peace to its receptivity to neo-Confucian philosophy from the Ming dynasty. Pound's contrast of Japan before and after 1853 is not one of nationalist isolationism with international openness. Instead, like Saigō, he saw it as a clash of two worldviews: one favouring what he saw as the "Bellum ... perenne" of usurocracy that wastes natural "abundance" and another, the Confucian, that

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to David Ewick for discovering the reading of Kōri's unusual pen-name, Kayano Hatakazu, under which Kōri wrote his articles on Strauss's *Elektra*. Ewick, "Notes," 25.

seeks to prosper by living within the means of such “abundance,”  
with “Neither flood nor flame falling in excess.”

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