

Japan's "Isolated Father" of Philosophy :
NISHI Amane 西周 *and His "Tetsugaku* 哲学"

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1. Introduction

Nishi Amane (西周 1829–97) was one of the first scholars to introduce Western philosophy to Japan, and he invented the term “哲学 (*tetsugaku*),” which has become the generally accepted Japanese translation for “philosophy.” For this reason, Nishi is often called “the father of philosophy in Japan,” and few people are likely to raise objections to such a label.

But it seems that, except for the term “哲学,” his philosophy itself has had no “direct descendants.” For most subsequent Japanese philosophers, Nishi’s thought was not considered a genealogical ancestor of their own philosophy. This was because, following the establishment of “philosophy as an academic discipline” in the 1880s, those Japanese philosophers who constituted the mainstream were adherents of German philosophy, rather than of the empirical philosophy of Comte and Mill that constituted the theoretical basis of Nishi’s philosophy. Thus Kuwaki Genyoku (桑木厳翼 1874–1946), a professor of philosophy at Tokyo Imperial University, while acknowledging that the term “*tetsugaku*” began to spread following the publication of Nishi’s “百一新論” (*Hyakuichi Shinron*) in 1874,¹ pointed out that the meaning of “哲学” in “百一新論” was not identical with the meaning it held in his

1. This article was based on a lecture Nishi had given just before the Meiji Restoration, and it is supposed that this lecture was delivered in 1867. See 蓮沼啓介, 『西周に於ける哲学の成立』(有斐閣, 1987), 40.

own era.

Such being the case, in contrast with Nishi's celebrity, the actual influence of his philosophy on the history of ideas in modern Japan has been very limited. Hence, previous studies on the philosophy of Nishi Amane have mainly considered the process of his acceptance of Western philosophy, and his invention of the term “哲学,” and have rarely referred to the actual content of his philosophy, or the position of philosophy within his system of thought.

In this article I will therefore analyze the structure of the whole system of Nishi's thought, including “philosophy,” and also describe the characteristics of Nishi's system of thought through a comparison with the thought of Yan Fu (嚴復 1854–1921), who was the first translator of modern Western philosophy in China, and who, like Nishi Amane, had no scholarly successor.

2. Nishi's view of “philosophy”

In May 1862, Nishi Amane left for the Netherlands to study political science at the behest of the Tokugawa shogunate, and from May 1863 he studied mainly law, economics and politics with Simon Visserling (1818–88), a professor of law at Leiden University, for two years. This experience, of course, greatly influenced the formation of Nishi's system of thought. But Nishi, when he left for the Netherlands, he was in his mid-thirties, and as well as acquiring considerable scholarship in the field of Confucianism, and had already studied Western learning for several years. Thus before his departure, Nishi had some prior knowledge of Western “philosophy,” and had formed his own elementary view of “philosophy.”

For example, in 1862, in a letter to his friend Matsuoka Rinjiro (松岡麟次郎 1820–98), Nishi discussed Western learning concerned with 性理 (*seiri*: human nature) and 經濟 (*keizai*: politics and economy)²,

2. Although in present day of Japanese *keizai* usually means “economy,” Nishi used this term in its broader Confucian sense, which includes various aspects of social management.

stating that it contained astonishingly great theories, and asserting that this learning was partly superior to Confucian theory. At the same time, he emphasized that these theories were the products of "philosophy (ヒロソヒ)"³, and had nothing to do with Christianity. This means that, for Nishi at that time, "philosophy" was a discipline which, as Confucianism, mainly dealt with 性理 and 經濟, and provided better solutions than Confucianism.⁴

Afterward, in an article titled "開題門" (*Kaidaimon*), which is supposed to have been written mainly during Nishi's last days in the Netherlands, and completed after his return to Japan, he maintained that Confucianism in the East and "philosophy (斐爾蘇比)"⁵ in the West were similar in that they sought to pursue the truths of both the physical world and human nature, and to construct an ideal social order based on these truths.⁶ In other words, Nishi assumed that "philosophy" in a broad sense included all disciplines of science, and was identical with Confucianism, especially 宋学 (*Sōgaku*) as typified by 朱子学 (*Shushigaku*) on this point.⁷

In "百一新論," the first published article in which the term 哲学 (*tetsugaku*) was used, while Nishi indicated the relative difference between 物理 (*butsuri*: principles in the natural field) and 心理 (*shinri*: principles in the human field), he emphasized that 心理 could not be inconsistent with 物理,⁸ and Nishi presumed that the main purpose of "philosophy" was to know all about 心理 on the basis of 物理 and to apply this knowledge to human society.⁹

Thus, in Nishi's understanding, there was not any considerable

3. "ヒロソヒ" is Nishi's Japanese *kana* transliteration of "philosophy."

4. 『西周全集』 vol.1 (宗高書房, 1960) ,8.

5. "斐爾蘇比" is Nishi's Japanese transliteration of "philosophy" in Chinese character.

6. 『西周全集』 vol.1 (宗高書房, 1960) ,19.

7. In the theory of 朱子学, according to the interpretation of *Daigaku* (大学), one of the Confucian scriptures, by Shushi (朱子 1130–1200), "格物致知 (*kakubutsu chichi*)" is said to be indispensable for understanding the principles of ethics and politics, and 格物致知 (often abbreviated to "格致 [*kakuchi*]") is considered to include natural sciences. Consequently, 格致 was generally used to designate Western natural science in East Asia, until it was replaced by the term "科学 (*kagaku*)."

8. 『西周全集』 vol.1 (宗高書房, 1960), 277.

9. 『西周全集』 vol.1 (宗高書房, 1960), 289.

difference between Western “philosophy” and Eastern Confucianism (especially 宋学) in their field and purpose. But, at the same time, Nishi pointed out that there was a fundamental distinction between 宋学 and “philosophy,” which Nishi himself learned in Europe.¹⁰ Although there had not been significant difference between 宋学 and Western “rationalism (羅觀奈恤士謨),” Western “philosophy” entered an entirely new stage after the foundation of “positivism(學士氏非士謨)” by August Comte. And according to Nishi, the supremacy of the “philosophy of positivism” consisted in its “empiric (晏比離) way” and “inductive (因數矩知否)¹¹ method,” which were formed by J.S. Mill and others, while Western “rationalism” and 宋学 are grounded on subjective speculation.¹²

Accordingly, the “philosophy” which was most valuable for Nishi Amane was the Comtian “philosophy of positivism,” and Nishi thought that the superiority of the “philosophy of positivism” came from its empirical methodology.

3. Nishi's failure to construct “philosophy” as a synthesized system

Despite the efforts of great scholars, the “philosophy of positivism” was not yet completed at the time Nishi studied it. For example, in discussing the achievement of Auguste Comte, Nishi praised his attempts at making the organic sciences, namely “生体学 (*seitaigaku*: biology)” and “人間学 (*jinkangaku*: sociology),” definite disciplines; but, as Nishi said, this attempt had proved so difficult that Comte had been irrelevantly absorbed in building a new religion,¹³ and as a consequence, had not succeeded in establishing “philosophy” as a system integrating all sciences.

10. In 1873, Nishi revealed that the reason why he had created the new term “*tetsugaku*” for the translation of “philosophy” was that he had been apprehensive that, if he used a traditional Confucian word, Japanese scholars would confuse Western philosophy and Eastern Confucianism. See “生性發蘊,” 『西周全集』, vol. 1, 19–20.

11. 羅觀奈恤士謨, 學士氏非士謨, 晏比離 and 因數矩知否 are Nishi's Japanese transliterations.

12. “開題門,” 『西周全集』, vol. 1, 19–20.

13. “生性發蘊,” 『西周全集』, vol. 1, 63.

Then, which part of the "philosophy of positivism" had the most serious weakness? Nishi mentioned that, before its appearance, there had been many valuable accomplishments in the fields of astronomy, physics and chemistry, while in the fields of morals, religion, politics, economy and law, which were important elements of 人間学, scholars had accumulated a large stock of knowledge, even though their studies had not been based on right methods.¹⁴ But 生体学 had not developed enough at his time to become an independent discipline, and it did not even have its own method. According to Nishi:

If, following Comte, we try to establish 生体学 as a discipline of science, the most difficult problem at present is still how to form an appropriate method for 生体学, and this problem has not yet been solved.¹⁵

According to Nishi's Comtian view, 生体学 was the integration of "生理学 (*seirigaku*: physiology)" and "性理学 (*seirigaku*: psychology)." Nishi noted however that, whereas in the field of 生理学, there had been a number of great scholars who had developed their investigations based on a knowledge of physics and chemistry, in the field of 性理学, metaphysical arguments still prevailed, because no scholars could have built 性理学 based on the knowledge of positivistic 生理学.¹⁶

Nishi also assumed that, if the firm foundations of 性理学 were laid, a positivistic 人間学 would be also built automatically.¹⁷ This means that the "missing link" of "philosophy of positivism" existed only in the relation between 生理学 and 性理学.

Hence, as a "philosopher" who succeeded to the Comtian research program, the most significant mission for Nishi was to establish 性理学, based on a knowledge of 生理学 on the ground of positivistic methodology. Nishi expected that, if such 性理学 was built, all sciences, from astronomy to sociology, would be integrated into a system,¹⁸

14. *Ibid.*, 63–64.

15. *Ibid.*, 64.

16. *Ibid.*, 64–65.

17. *Ibid.*, 65.

18. *Ibid.*, 65.

which, for Nishi signified the completion of the “philosophy of positivism.”

In an attempt to attain this end, Nishi Amane began to write an article titled “生性発蘊”(Seisei Hatsusun) ¹⁹ in 1873. However, he could not succeed in this attempt, ²⁰ failing to complete “生性発蘊,” which remained unpublished for a long time. Finally, Nishi abandoned his plan to construct “philosophy” as a synthesized system of all sciences. ²¹

Then, why did Nishi fail in his ambitious attempt? I suppose that his view of “性 (sei: human nature)” was one of the causes of his failure.

Although Nishi pointed out that we could not apply the knowledge of psychology directly to comprehend social phenomena, ²² Nishi seemed to understand that society was above all an aggregate of individuals, and did not have its own special character.

For example, in an article titled “人生三宝説” (*Jinsei Sanbōsetsu*) (1875), Nishi insisted that our social conduct should aim for the realization of “公益 (koeki: public interest),” and that 公益 was the aggregate of all “私利 (shiri: self interests),” in the apparent belief that 私利 should not be opposed to 公益. ²³ Such a naive view of public interest implies that Nishi did not take account of conflicts between “public and private” or “society and the individual,” and this notion derived from Nishi’s idea that society was the necessary product of human nature (性).

According to Nishi, every human being, however uncivilized he/she may be, possesses the same nature (性). Human nature embraces “為群ノ性 (*igun no sei*: nature to build society)” and all elements essential to maintain and develop a society, such as morality and law, can be

19. This title means “To discover and expand the ultimate principles of physiology and psychology.”

20. For the concrete process of Nishi’s attempt and failure, see 小泉仰『西周と欧米思想の出会い』(三嶺書房, 1989), chapter 3「西周の統一科学の試み」, section 4「『生性発蘊』の中のコントの人間性論」.

21. In 1882, Nishi stated that he lacked the ability to fulfill the integration of 生理学 and 性理学 (see “尚白箴記” [*Shobak Sakki*], 『西周全集』, vol. 1, 167), and he did not make any further attempt until his death.

22. “生性発蘊,” 『西周全集』, vol.1, 65.

23. 『西周全集』, vol.1, 532.

formed by the expansion of human nature.²⁴ Although it seems that there is a clear distinction between Western civilized society and the society of primitive tribes, it is not a difference in quality but quantity, generated by the level of expansion of human nature.²⁵

In the system of the "philosophy of positivism," the problem of "性 (human nature)" is of course the object of "psychology," translated as 性理学. Therefore, if we agree with Nishi's opinion about human nature, "sociology" can be virtually constructed by the enlargement of "psychology," despite his separation of the disciples of "sociology" and "psychology." And we also observe that Nishi's notion of human nature resembles the Confucian "性善說 (*seizensetsu*: the view that human nature is good)," accepted by most of the 宋学 scholars.

How then can we prove the existence of such human nature as 為群ノ性 *in all human beings* on the basis of our knowledge of positivistic "physiology"? I suppose that the difficulty in solving this question caused Nishi to fail in the construction of his own "philosophy"; that is to say, his view of human nature, which is similar to the Confucian view, was one of the causes of his failure.

4. *The case of Yan Fu* (嚴復)

In order to establish the characteristics of Nishi's thought, I think that a comparison with Yan Fu (1854–1921), a famous scholar who tried to introduce modern Western thought as a system of knowledge into China, as Nishi did in Japan, will be useful.

From 1877 to 1879, Yan Fu stayed in England and learned at The Royal Naval College of Greenwich as one of the first overseas students sent by the Qing (清) government to Europe. Unlike other students, Yan Fu was deeply interested in social science and philosophy, as well as naval learning.

After his return to China, he worked at Tianjin (天津) Naval College

24. "百一新論," 『西周全集』, vol. 1, 282–283. On this point, human 為群ノ性 differs from the herd instinct of animals such as cattle, sheep and so on.

25. "人生三宝說," 『西周全集』, vol. 1, 524–525.

for nearly twenty years. In 1895, in the middle of the Sino-Japanese War, Yan Fu started to publish articles about social problems, in which he criticized traditional Chinese learning and emphasized the urgent need to import modern Western learning. In 1898, he officially published “天演論” (*Tiānyānlùn*), a translation of *Evolution and Ethics* (1894) by T. H. Huxley, which created a great sensation in the Chinese intellectual community.

For Yan Fu, like Nishi Amane, the superiority of modern Western learning over traditional Chinese learning lay in its “method.” Regarding the development of Western learning, Yan Fu wrote:

In the middle age of the Ming (明) dynasty, Bacon in England and Descartes in France advocated a science based on the method of positivistic induction. Afterward, scholars such as Newton, Galileo and Harvey reaped rich harvests by using this method, and the defects of old learning were exposed one after another.²⁶

Although Yan’s interpretation of the history of Western learning is questionable, the fact that he believed that the inductive method caused Western learning to proceed to a new stage is unquestionable. Furthermore, Yan Fu, like Nishi Amane, regarded J. S. Mill as the most important scholar in the formation of the inductive method. While Nishi pointed out that Western learning greatly progressed after the publication of Mill’s *A System of Logic* (1843),²⁷ Yan Fu himself attempted to translate this voluminous book.²⁸

Yan Fu also insisted that another merit of modern Western learning was its systematic structure. He admired the thought of Herbert Spencer, especially his *System of Synthetic Philosophy* (1862–93), which Yan Fu considered to be a unprecedented work in the history of Europe. Yan Fu believed that Spencer’s system of philosophy integrated all scientific disciplines according to only one principle, namely the

26. “天演論,” comment of Yan Fu to “論十一 学派,” 『嚴復集』, ed. 王栻 (中華書局, 1986), 1385.

27. “百学連環” (1870), 『西周全集』, vol. 4, 23.

28. Yan Fu published a partial translation, from the Introduction to Book III Chapter XIII in 1905.

principle of "evolution," which derived from positivistic investigations of phenomena in all fields.²⁹

Therefore, for Yan Fu, the "missing link" between 生理学 and 性理学 that worried Nishi Amane did not exist, because that "missing link" had in fact already been established by Spencer. How then did Yan Fu solve the problem of human nature, especially 為群ノ性, which had caused Nishi's failure?

To tell the truth, Huxley, the author of *Evolution and Ethics*, held a view of human nature somewhat similar to Nishi Amane's. Huxley maintained that *sympathy*, which other animals did not have enough, existed in human nature. This *sympathy* restrained excessive self-assertion, so that human beings were able to build societies more successfully than other animals.³⁰ We find that Huxley's notion of sympathy in human nature resembles Nishi's 為群ノ性.

Yan Fu however did not accept Huxley's opinion, and pointed out that Huxley had mistaken the result for the cause. Yan Fu insisted that to build a society was one of the effective means to win the struggle for existence, and that the probability of survival was in proportion to the degree of solidarity within the society and the solidarity of a society arose from the ability to sympathize. Therefore, while there had been human beings lacking this ability, through the long process of natural selection they already had become extinct. As a result, all people in the world at present possessed the ability to sympathize.³¹

Yan's view of human nature based on the mechanism of natural selection essentially followed the discussion of Spencer,³² and if we adopt this idea, the problem of the relation between 生理学, which mainly deals with aspects of human beings as animals, and 性理学, which mainly deals with aspects that only human beings have, will not be significant.

29. "天演論," comment of Yan Fu to "導論一 察變," 『嚴復集』, 1325.

30. "天演論," "導論十二 人群," 『嚴復集』, 1346–47.

31. "天演論," comment of Yan Fu to "導論十二 人群," 『嚴復集』, 1347.

32. Of course, whether the discussion of Spencer is correct or not is another problem.

5. Conclusion

As mentioned above, if Nishi Amane had accepted Spencer's evolutionary philosophy, it would have been possible for him to solve his puzzle, and would have established a "philosophy" as a synthesized system of sciences. But Nishi does not appear to have had a special interest in the philosophy of Herbert Spencer, even though his work was widely read in middle Meiji Japan.³³

Why then was Nishi not attracted by evolutionary philosophy? Although I cannot draw a definite conclusion here, I suppose that one of the causes was Nishi's assumption that human beings had a privileged status in the world.

For Nishi, the most important aim of science (and "philosophy" as the systematic integration of all sciences which Nishi had tried to complete) was to grasp 物理 and 心理, and he regarded "理 (principles)" as the order of "天 (Heaven)."³⁴ Therefore, the existence of 心理 as the particular principles in the human field meant that Heaven had given "special orders" to human beings. At the same time, Nishi pointed out that only human beings could understand the "order of Heaven,"³⁵ and, naturally, only human beings could realize it.

It is probable that Nishi's idea that human beings should occupy a special position in the world prevented him from accepting evolutionary philosophy, which did not admit that there was a definite distinction between human being and other animals.

33. In an article titled "学問ハ淵源ヲ深クスルニ在ルノ論" (1877), he wrote his impression of Spencer's *The Principles of Psychology*. It is thus certain that Nishi had read at least some books of Spencer. 『西周全集』, vol.1, 568–73.

34. "教門論" (1874), 『西周全集』, vol. 1, 505–506.

35. "理の字の説" (1887–89?), 『西周全集』, vol. 1, 600.