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Reading Commercial Societies:
Kaihō Seiryō and Bernard Mandeville

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1. Introduction

To explore the possibility of making Japanese philosophy an academic discipline, I would like to pursue the possibility of comparative studies on philosophy of the early modern period.

When we try to analyze some Japanese thinker's text, we are likely to do so in the framework of intellectual history or the genealogy of ideas. For example, in the research field of early modern thought in Japan, we have a coherent and powerful genealogy of ideas that Maruyama Masao 丸山眞男 submitted more than half century ago in his Studies in the *Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan* 日本政治思想史研究 [1], which we still refer to directly or indirectly. In this case, our understanding of a historical text could be established through a dialogue with the text and its genealogical context, the latter giving status to the former, and sometimes the former provokes a revision of the latter. However, the problem with this way of understanding is that the genealogy tends to fix the points relevant to it in analyzing the text. In other words, it illuminates and limits the issues of arguments, and possibly suppresses pursuit of the features outside the given points on textual analysis. That is why here I would like to pursue the possibility of a comparative study as one way to broaden our perspective for interpreting the text.

Here I would like to do a comparative study of the thought of Kaihō Seiryō 海保青陵 (1755–1817).

1. Original edition was published in 1952, the English translation published in 1974.

2. Kaihō Seiryō, a wandering intellectual

To begin with, let me introduce Kaihō Seiryō, a Confucian scholar of late 18th century Japan. Seiryō was born in Edo as the eldest son of a chief retainer of a Daimyo in charge of finance. He learned Confucianism under Usami Shinsui 宇佐美灊水 (1710–1776), one of Ogyū Sorai's 荻生徂徠 (1666–1728) famous disciples. At the age of 25 he passed his heirdom on to his younger brother, and at 35 he left Edo. After that he traveled around as a Confucian teacher until he settled in Kyoto at the age of 52. A distinct characteristic of Seiryō's travel is illustrated in the following comments he makes of himself.

> I am a Confucian scholar who undertakes any task concerning economy (*keizai* 経済) in various places. So I often ask Sōsuke [富永宗助 Tominaga Sōsuke, merchant, one of Seiryō's followers] to raise funds, and I have succeeded several hundred times on this business. (*Honpudan* 本富談) [2]

This is an important aspect of his travels. He visited various houses to consult on the management of household finances. Succeeding in improving their finances of his consultees "several hundred times" seems exaggerated, but he showed an extraordinary enthusiasm and pride in his profession. He possessed the role of a management consultant, and many of his writings reflect his activities.

Seiryō uses the term *Keizai* in his writings, which meant wealth and resources or the management of them. This is an early case of the use of the word with the same meaning as it is used today. It is originally an abbreviation of the word *Keiseisaimin* 経世済民 which literally means "governing the world and succoring the people," but he himself wrote that its abbreviated use was already popular among Osaka merchants. The fact that he used this abbreviated version shows his shared attitude with the merchants' which deviated from Confucian scholars'. Its deviation is closely related to Seiryō's radical recognition of commercial society.

2. Kuranami Seiji 蔵並省自, ed., *Kaihō Seiryō Zenshū* 海保青陵全集 (*Yachiyo-Shuppan* 八千代出版, 1976), 123.

He said, "The present circulation of money has no parallel in history. […] From the top to the bottom everyone buys and sells, therefore everyone is a merchant."(*Zenchūdan* 善中談) [3] Some other contemporary intellectuals also direct much attention to this development of commercial trade in society, and their comments more or less expressed their disapproval of the expansion of such money-centered relations. However, no one else commented on the following,

> The emperor is a man of wealth whose world is his commodity, and the lords' domains are their commodities. They lease the land to people and lived off the interest. Samurais sold their intellectual ability to the lords and lived on the wages. They are not at all that different from sedan-chair bearers who get their wages by bearing a sedan-chair for one *ri* 里, and with their earnings they buy rice-cakes and sake. (*Keikodan* 稽古談) [4]

This argument went far beyond criticizing the spread of commercial trades. In this passage Seiryō did not just accept those commercial relations, but also sought to redefine all existing social relations in terms of trade. Importantly, by so doing, he practically claimed the idea that all social relations from the emperor to sedan-chair bearers, "which had once been regarded as an inherent natural order that human beings have to enter, were clearly seen as a union based on the free will of those concerned."(Maruyama) [5] Acknowledging his theory on commercial relations as unique and worthy of consideration, Maruyama counts Seiryō's argument among the new proponents of a radical reconstruction of institutions proposed by Sorai and states that Seiryō inherited all of Sorai's realism.

However, along with his role in management consultation, Seiryō had another face. He was absorbed in writing literature so much that, according to his own retrospect, he started traveling in order to practice his writing. Later he wrote a brilliant book about the art of writing,

3. *Ibid.*, 490
4. *Ibid.*, 9.
5. Maruyama Masao, *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan*, trans. Hane Mikiso (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1974), 297.

Bunpōhiun 文法披雲 (1798). During his travels he stayed in various places under the patronage of his followers or friends including merchants, rich farmers and samurai. We can say that he was one of the literati (*bunjin* 文人) who became popular in late 18th-century Japan. However, he seems to have been different from his highbrow contemporaries. A famous Confucian scholar and historian Rai Sanyō 頼山陽 (1780–1832) wrote an interesting and contemptuous comment on Seiryō in a letter to his friend Kan Chazan 菅茶山 (1748–1827) in 1815:

> Kaihō Gihei 海保儀平 (Seiryō. His old name is Hikoroku 彦六) used to be a professional jester in Yoshiwara 吉原 [the licensed pleasure quarters] in Edo. He went by the name "Jusha-Hiko" 儒者彦 [Confucian scholar Hiko] there.

We do not have any clear evidence to determine whether Sanyō's comment is true or not. But it is certain that this remark references a peculiar characteristic of Seiryō. Seiryō had a large circle of acquaintances, including people involved in Yoshiwara, and it was said thatin the Toyama district, where he stayed for a long time, he was nicknamed "Mamezo" 豆蔵 [a talk entertainer]. Moreover, titles of most of his texts include the word *dan* 談, or talk, such as *Keikodan* 稽古談, *Zenshikidan* 前識談, *Fūkidan* 富貴談, etc, and actually these volumes are full of bitter jokes and startling logic written in a talkative and casual tone, as his mention of sedan-chair bearers in the above quotation, for example.

Does this characteristic have any connection with the significance of his thought regarding Japanese intellectual history? With the viewpoint of a development of Sorai's logic, which Maruyama adopted, this characteristic might only obscure his position in that genealogical context. I will consider this question later.

3. On the Conflict Between Traditional Morality and the Economic Relationships

Seiryō often criticized conventional moral principles and moral behav-

ior. Let me show you one example. He states:

> If everyone in the country is all very filial 孝 to their parents, they may neglect their business because they want to stay with their parents at home in order to constantly take care of them, but if people don't gain anything in the outer world and abandon everything for the interests of others, their country will soon decline. If people don't want to work hard at their profession, this country will not get wealthy. If the country does get wealthy, they will be able to nurse their parents more easily. Otherwise they will not. Therefore we have to say that to concentrate solely on nursing one's family proves to show a lack of filial piety. (経済話 *Keizaiwa*) [6]

Seiryō explains here a case in which virtuous conduct might bear results contrary to what is intended. This paradox is composed of the intervention of socio-economic relations that contemporary people are likely to disregard. He argues that conventional moral principles on which we depend do not just lead us in the right direction in this world, but that theyalso blind us, especially from seeing economic realities.

Here, I would like to think about Seiryō's thought on the conflict between traditional morality and economic realities through a comparison with early 18th century English literati, Bernard Mandeville's (1670–1733) *The Fable of the Bees: Or Private Vices, Publick Benefits.* Let me introduce a part of an imaginary dialogue between two men in *The Fable of the Bees*, concerning the relationship of rich distillers and their miserable patrons.

> If I should ever urge to him, that to have here and there one great and eminent Distiller, was a poor equivalent for the vile Means, the certain Want, and lasting Misery of so many thousand Wretches, as were necessary to raise them, he would answer, that of this I could be no Judge, because I don't know what vast Benefit they might afterwards be of to the Commonwealth. Perhaps, would he say, the Man thus

6. *Kaihō Seiryō Zenshū*, 330.

> rais'd will exert himself in the Commission of the Peace, or other Station, with Vigilance and Zeal against the Dissolute and Disaffected, and retaining his stirring Temper, be as industrious in spreading Loyalty, and the Reformation of Manners throughout every cranny of the wide populous Town, as once he was in filling it with Spirits; till he becomes at last the Scourge of Whores, of Vagabonds and Beggars, the Terrour of Rioters and discontented Rabbles, and constant Plague to Sabbath-breaking Butchers. Here my good-humour'd Antagonist would Exult and Triumph over me, especially if he could instance to me such a bright Example. What an uncommon Blessing, would he cry out, is this Man to his Country! how shining and illustrious his Virtue!
>
> To justify his Exclamation he would demonstrate to me, that it was impossible to give a fuller Evidence of Self-denial in a grateful Mind, than to see him at the expense of his Quiet and hazard of his Life and Limbs, be always harassing, and even for Trifles persecuting that very Class of Men to whom he owes his Fortune, from no other Motive than his Aversion to Idleness, and great Concern for Religion and the Publick Welfare.[7]

This is also a criticism of moral principles with a more sarcastic tone and detailed description. At that time the commissions actually made efforts to enforce discipline in the town of London with the strong support of the Society for the Reformation of Manners (established in the 1690's). Mandeville demonstrated a probable contradiction between wealth and virtues, supposing a commission from newly risen distillers who attack his hidden patrons. He poured ridicule on such people as members of that Society who, with good intentions. tried to instill certain morals or discipline, by pointing out that they had completely forgotten about what basically supported their own lives, the commercial relations connected with their wealth.

Challenging and sometimes overturning the conventional moral val-

7. F. B. Kaye, *The Fable of the Bees: Or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits. By Bernard Mandeville, With a Commentary Critical, Historical, and Explanatory by F. B. Kay*e, Volume 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924, Reprinted edition: Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1988), 93.

ues by indicating the utterly unexpected causes and effects is the characteristic quality of *The Fable of the Bees*, and it is expressed sharply in the subtitle *Private Vices, Publick Benefits*.

Of course there are differences between Mandeville and Seiryō, such as their economic backgrounds, the difference of normative intensity between Christian morality in England and Confucian beliefs in Japan, etc. As for their economic views, for instance, consumption often played a vital role in Mandeville's paradoxes as in the case above, but Seiryō did not refer to the role of consumption so much in his texts.

Despite such differences, we can admit that these two thinkers have similar attitudes and viewpoints toward commercial societies. Both of them share in their recognition that there existed active systems of relations that we cannot grasp in terms of morality; and those systems were related to the intricate economic networks that permeated and imprisoned entirecommercial societies.

4. Honest and Poor Society or Vicious and Affluent Society

One more thing I want to emphasize here is that both of these writers essentially did not justify the pursuit of interests, the most fundamental constituent of commercial societies. Indeed they severely criticized virtuous behavior from their economic point of view and confirmed some vices bearing the pursuit of economic interests, but they continued to regard these vices as vices. Seiryō wrote,

> In the present world people of all classes are cunning. So, waiting for even the moment when the people may let down their guard, people of the neighboring countries are constantly elaborating on plans to take advantage of the chance to flood the rival country with their own wretched water of poverty. Indeed this is an extremely frivolous, mean, terribly vicious and immoral custom which must be punished by ancient saint kings, but if we only do something good, greatly virtuous, benevolent and right to avoid punishment, the wretched water will flood into us, and, no matter how big the power of our country is, we will suddenly become poor, hungry and cold. People

will make a mockery of us. What a pity it is! (*Fūkidan* 富貴談) [8]

As far as this passage is concerned, Seiryō has no intention of justifying struggles over money. Plainly speaking, he confronted people with two alternatives: to be saved from wickedness or to be saved from wretchedness. He is clear of his choice of the latter, but what is characteristic of him is that in his opinion it is not a virtuous way but an "unavoidable" one.

The following is the beginning of "The Moral" in the poem "*The Grumbling Hive: or, Knaves turn'd Honest*" which is the base of *The Fable of the Bees*.

The story of this poem is as follows: In a hive full of bees, various vices such as avarice, prodigality, luxury, pride, envy, vanity etc., prevail and the resident bees enjoy prosperity. But the bees' complaints about these vices and their longing for an honest society gradually increase, until one day at last they anger Jupiter so much that he rids the hive of all its vices. An honest society comes into existence; however, as a result, all motivation in the hive disappears along with all vices, and the society undergoes a decline.

Mandeville begins "The Moral" of this poem like this:

> Then leave the Complaints: Fools only strive
> To make a Great an Honest Hive
> T'enjoy the World's Conveniences,
> Be fam'd in War, yet live in Ease,
> Without great Vices, is a vain
> Eutopia seated in the Brain.[9]

What Mandeville rejected here is the possibility of a virtuous society of affluence. However, he at least proposed two alternatives to this, much like Seiryō. That is, we can choose to have either an honest and poor society or a vicious and affluent society. For Mandeville as well as Seiryō, the choice was easy and inevitable, but what is important is that

8. *Kaihō Seiryō Zenshū*, 527.
9. *The Fable of the Bees*, 1: 36.

they similarly argued that we have no more than two options for the relationship between virtue and wealth.

We know that there also existed intellectual movements that confirmed virtue in the pursuit of interests and gave optimistic visions of commercial societies. The leading philosopher Adam Smith (1723–1790), who learned much from Mandeville, said, "It is the great fallacy of Dr. Mandeville's book to represent every passion as wholly vicious, which is so in any degree and in any direction." (*The Theory of Moral Sentiments*) [10]

Smith introduced a sense of propriety to judge actions proceeding from passions, and therefore in his opinion there exists a proper pursuit of interests. In Japan Ishida Baigan 石田梅岩 (1685–1744) is famous for his insistence that there is a virtuous way for merchants and a virtuous pursuit of interests. He founded the *Shingaku* 心学 movement which would become the most influential philosophy among commoners in the late 18th century.

What are the essential differences between Mandeville and Smith, and between Seiryō and Baigan?

5. Observation on the scene of buying and selling

To begin to answer this question, I want to point out the intense curiosity of Seiryō and Mandeville about the scene of buying and selling. It is interesting that both of them directed psychological attention to the difference between acts and what motivates them on negotiation in commercial exchanges.

Mandeville spent several pages showing a detailed observation on behavior and mind of a silk dealer waiting on a woman customer while trading. For example, "tho" here he has the liberty of telling what Lies he pleases, as to the Prime Cost and the Money he has refused, yet he trusts not to them only; but attacking her Vanity makes her believe the most incredible Things in the World, concerning his own Weakness

10. Adam Smith, *The theory of moral sentiments,* ed. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 312.

and her superior Abilities." [11]

Seiryō also gave a psychological description of a seller persuading the customer to buy, using the concept of two-divided mind within one person. For example,

> First, he [a seller] talks about the weather, offers a cup of tea, lights the customer's cigarette, asks about the time and offers some sake. Offering tea is a loss and spending time is also a loss. Offering sake is even more of a loss. But suffering this loss is the way to make a profit. […] Therefore you cannot trade well without both a commander's mind of getting money from customers and a soldier's mind of treating them just like they would like to treat others. (*Rōshi-Kokujikai* 老子国字解) [12]

Both writers' sensitive and shrewd observations revealed avarice twisted inside polite behavior in the scene of buying and selling, where Smith and Baigan might have found a fair trade or good selling.

We cannot say that Baigan and Smith dismissed the scene itself, but the point is that they sought to find or invent the conditions to justify the pursuit of interests, rather than pay insightful attention even into sellers' minds. In Baigan's opinion, it is a consistent attitude of honesty in trading that enabled merchants to pursue interests virtuously. In Smith's opinion, much more important than that is the economic system as a whole. This system determines a fair price, which will be the standard of judging a good seller or not.

However, if Seiryō and Mandeville had commented on them, Seiryō would have regarded honest behavior as just an unconscious strategy of succeeding in trade, and Mandeville would have criticized the fairness of a fair price or a fair trade that just distracted our attention from the selling itself and the vice hidden in it. There is a clear difference on this point between them.

11. *The Fable of the Bees*, 1: 351–2.
12. *Kaihō Seiryō Zenshū*, 804.

6. Interest in Rhetoric

Here let me fill in some of Bernard Mandeville's background. He was a member of the English literati in early 18th century. His masterpiece *The Fable of the Bees* gained him publicity, although frequently bad publicity, throughout Europe.

Born in Rotterdam in the Netherlands, Mandeville studied medicine at the University of Leyden. He moved to England in the mid-1690s and lived there until his death. One strong reason for his move to London was his interest in practicing English.[13] Actually, although a physician by vocation, he started a career as an English writer with an English translation of La Fontaine's fables including his own ones (1703), and wrote some articles and fables before writing *The Fable of the Bees* (first edition 1714), a work which is full of biting sarcasm and surprising criticism written in a talkative tone. Young Benjamin Franklin got an opportunity to meet Mandeville at a club in London in 1724 or 1725. He wrote in his *Autobiography*,

> He [Lyons, a surgeon] […] carried me to the Horns, a pale Alehouse in—Lane, Cheapside, and introduced me to Dr. Mandeville, Author of The Fable of the Bees, who had a Club there, of which he was the Soul, being a most facetious, entertaining Companion.[14]

Here is thus another entertaining intellectual who was conscious of writing and talking. It is interesting that Mandeville shared these characteristics with Seiryō, even his shadiness. And this fact urges us to consider connections between their thoughts and these characteristics which may seem insignificant at first glance when one examines only the genealogical context of Seiryō's thought.

To put it simply, I think that their interest in rhetoric is the most important thing distilled from their commonality in order to consider their connections. It made both of them prefer reading societies rhe-

13. *A Treatise of the Hypochondriack and Hysterick Diseases* (1730), cited by F. B. Kaye, "Life of Mandeville," in *The Fable of the Bees*, 1: xix.
14. Benjamin Franklin, *Writings*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1987), 1346.

torically, rather than judging them moralistically. With this viewpoint, let me take two other examples to illustrate their features.

As for morality, Seiryō claims that the difference of virtue and vice ultimately depends on whether one can give a clever and refined expression of his/her self-love or not.[15] And one remarkable feature of *The Fable of the Bees* is that Mandeville shows that a variety of virtuous behaviors can be explained with self-love as a motivation.[16] It is clear that their rhetorical analyses work here to expose a variety of rhetorical connections between acts and their motives in people.

Moreover, we can see that both of them assumed that rhetoric made up the foundation for societies. When, like other 18th century intellectuals, they talked about their ideas of the origin of social order, interestingly both of them depicted scenes similar to the negotiations of buying and selling.

Mandeville tells a hypothetical history that places the origin of establishing the social order in a scenario in which wise men faced selfish and cunning people.[17] These wise men make thorough efforts to persuade the people to obey the order, but it is in vain. At last they find that "Flattery must be the most powerful Argument that could be used to Human Creatures." Then through this artful way of flattery they praise the understanding and rational nature of people first, and then gradually insinuate themselves into people's hearts while beginning to instruct them on social virtues. The strategy of these wise men immediately reminds us of the silk dealer's attitude of humility and flattery to his customer described in *The Fable*.

What Seiryō tells us about establishing social order is the symbolic scene in which Laozi faces the lords who were all driven by the desire for conquest (*Rōshi-Kokujikai* 老子国字解).[18]

Laozi appeared after Confucius' failure in persuading the lords to build the social order. Laozi began to say the opposite of what Confucius had said to them, "You should acquire things that others have. And you should be the leader of others. It is against human senti-

15. For example, *Kaihō Seiryō Zenshū,* 747.
16. For example, *The Fable of the Bees,* 1: 72–3.
17. *An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue in The Fable of the Bees,* 1: 41–57.
18. *Kaihō Seiryō Zenshū,* 798.

ments to let others have yours. It is also against human sentiments to follow others." The lords felt that Laozi understood their mind exactly and leaned forward to hear him. Laozi calmly continued, "If you want to acquire others' things, the best thing to do is to let others acquire your things first. Otherwise you will not acquire things. […] If you want to lead others, the best thing to do is to follow others first."

It is clear that the logic that Laozi advised and practiced himself is also the same as the seller's strategy that Seiryō described above.

We can say that in both thinkers' opinions, commercial negotiation symbolizes that the foundation of society was established and constantly renewed through the work of rhetoric.

7. Conclusion

In comparison with Bernard Mandeville, we can clearly see that Kaihō Seiryō shared with Mandeville the intellectual intention of analyzing societies and human behavior rhetorically—reading closely intricate cause-effect relationships produced by commercial economy and people's passions in social relations. Precisely because they thought that in contemporary societies, conventional moral principles tend to prevent people from reading situations around them scrupulously, they delivered harsh criticism of people's blind acceptance. Nevertheless, realizing clearly that they faced commercial societies that were unprecedented in history, Seiryō and Mandeville hardly sought new virtues to adapt to these societies and new philosophies offering any positive vision. Instead, their shared entertaining and jesting attitudes suggest that they preferred to keep on their contemporary secular societies, which consisted of wealthy rhetorical detours and details. And in Seiryō's case, he established his own specialty of devising rhetorical strategies of management on the basis of that observation. If we suppose the philosophy of Kaihō Seiryō, we will find it the philosophy as a style of those activities in the opaqueness of the world.

We have to say that comparative study is in essence an audacious attempt, and that there is a high risk of analytically arbitrary or confused comparisons. However, I think that these studies can provide us

with new keys to the essentiality of thoughts that deviate from the given genealogical contexts.