

Engaging Confucian Ethics as Philosophy: Japanese Confucianism as a Cautionary Tale?

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Abstract

This paper looks at the relationships among Japanese Confucianism, Confucian ethics and Confucianism as philosophy. It examines this relationship from three different angles: first, by examining the transformation of Japanese Confucianism into “Chinese philosophy”, which helped facilitate the Japanese national morality and imperial way discourses; second, by examining an alternative view of the Edo period Japanese Confucianism as having achieved the development of universal Confucian ethics even before the advent of European philosophy in East Asia; and finally, by examining the relationship between Confucian philosophy versus Confucian ritual as highlighted by the development of Japanese Confucianism. Building upon the understanding that Japanese Confucians were also working towards resolving the tensions of the relationship between the particular, universal and exemplary that marked their specific engagement with Confucianism outside of the Chinese cultural context, the paper tries to think about how the cautionary tale of Japanese Confucianism might help inform future philosophical studies of Confucian ethics in the global space.

Keywords: Japanese Confucianism, Confucian ethics, Chinese philosophy, imperial way, particular and universal

Filozofska obravnava konfucijanske etike: japonsko konfucijanstvo kot svarilo?

Izvleček

Prispevek obravnava odnos med japonskim konfucianizmom, konfucijansko etiko ter konfucijanstvom kot filozofijo. To razmerje preučuje s treh različnih zornih kotov: prvič, z analizo preoblikovanja japonskega konfucijanstva v »kitajsko filozofijo«, kar je pripomoglo k spodbujanju japonskih diskurzov narodne morale in cesarske poti; nato z analizo alternativnega pogleda na japonsko konfucijanstvo obdobja Edo, ki je razvilo univerzalno konfucijansko etiko že pred prihodom evropske filozofije v Vzhodno Azijo; ter nazadnje z analizo vprašanja konfucijanske filozofije v razmerju do konfucianistične obrednosti, ki ga osvetljuje primer japonskega konfucianizma. Na podlagi razumevanja, da so japonske

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konfucijanke in konfucijanci delovali tudi v smeri rešitev napetosti v odnosu med partikularnim, univerzalnim in vzornim, ki so zaznamovale njihovo specifično obravnavo konfucijanstva zunaj kitajskega kulturnega konteksta, avtor poskuša razmisliti, kako bi lahko zgodba japonskega konfucianizma kot svarilo pomagala osmisliti prihodnje filozofske študije konfucijanske etike v globalnem prostoru.

Ključne besede: japonsko konfucijanstvo, konfucijanska etika, kitajska filozofija, cesarska pot, univerzalno in partikularno

Introduction

Speaking of Confucianism in Japan, Kiri Paramore notes that “in [post-war Japan] Confucianism quickly became taboo. Meiji¹ had destroyed Confucian institutions and practice; fascism and World War II destroyed Confucianism’s reputation. Associated closely with the fascist politics which had brought about the devastation of the war, it was tainted” (Paramore 2016, 167). Shaun O’Dwyer further notes that in truth Confucianism might not have been completely tabooized, and, for example, the famous Japanese political scholar Maruyama Masao 丸山眞男 (1914–1996) “did continue to publish and edit studies on Japanese Confucian intellectual history. Yet, in repudiation of the preceding generation of Confucian scholars and national morality theorists, Maruyama’s postwar thought denied Confucianism any role as a positive morality in modern life” (O’Dwyer 2025, xix).

There is enough scholarship to demonstrate how the Japanese Confucian project helped facilitate the historic calamities of Japanese imperialism and fascism, and one would be hard pressed to argue Confucianism is headed for any sort of revival as an influential social force in Japan any time soon. However, Kiri Paramore also posits:

If anyone will contend that Confucianism can be a universalist force for international good, then they must study Confucianism outside only a Chinese cultural setting. Looking at the long-term history of Confucianism in a non-Chinese cultural setting is particularly meaningful and necessary for considering what capacities that tradition might have in an international setting. [And] as David Kang has rightly pointed out, Japan is the most peripheral and most un-Sinicized of the East Asian countries where Confucianism flourished.² This makes it a particularly good example for comparison with China and for assessing the claimed universalist possibilities of Confucianism. (Paramore 2016, 12)

1 明治時代 (1868–1912).

2 See also Kang (2010).

Paramore's language invokes the idea of Japanese Confucianism as a cautionary tale—an example of how Confucian ethics, positioned outside its Chinese cultural context, then severed from its institutional and social engagements through a transformation into a specific version of “Chinese philosophy”, was instrumentalized to serve the interests of the Japanese nationalist state.³ Throughout his work Paramore demonstrates how this is not due to some inherent flaw of Confucianism, but rather due to complex historical factors; however, he also proposes a thesis that Confucian ethics—seen as mere philosophy when its religious and social dimensions are disregarded—may be especially vulnerable to such instrumentalization (see e.g. *ibid.*, 149–53).

I do not try to adjudicate the debate of whether Confucianism should rightly be considered closer to a religion or to philosophy. I believe in different senses and different guises it might align with both (if this dichotomy is even necessary in an East Asian context), and it might depend more on how one engages with it. However, when it comes to the project of explicating and developing Confucian ethics as universal in the global context, I believe philosophy does have a key role to play. And if we are not too held up by narrow and strict definitions, it is probably not too bold to say Confucianism in its universal ethical positions possesses intrinsic philosophical dimensions. In this I find John Allen Tucker's and Huang Chun-chieh's description persuasive:

What [is here understood] by philosophy consists of [...] [the] sort of ongoing engagement in critical, self-reflective discussion of and speculative theorizing about ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, political theory, and spiritual problems, as well as aesthetics, cosmology, and ontology, with the goal being the attainment of a more profound understanding of ourselves, others, the world, and the universe at large. Confucians in East Asia have been doing this for over two millennia, since the time of Confucius.⁴ (Tucker and Huang 2014, 4)

However, Paramore's criticism should not be disregarded. Confucianism as philosophy also has a specific history in a different sense—that in many ways is also connected to Japanese Confucianism. It was in Japan where through the systematizing and comparative work of Inoue Testujirō 井上哲次郎 (1855–1944) the project of Confucianism as “Chinese philosophy” was proposed for

3 The idea of a “cautionary tale” might seem, at first glance, to be too moralistically coloured for a proper analytical discourse. However, I contend that Confucian ethics are very much built upon the interpretation and reinterpretation of both exemplary and cautionary tales. I will therefore allow myself to use this term, while acknowledging that it may somewhat overburden the analytical dimensions of the present paper.

4 For another nuanced discussion of this question, see Ishii (2020–2021).

the first time in East Asia and played a big role in the transformation of Japanese Confucianism during the Meiji period. The significance of this is two-fold: Inoue was one of the first to systematically juxtapose those philosophical dimensions of Chinese philosophy with Western philosophy in a comparative way and to translate concepts from one tradition into the other. However, he also did it in service of a new Japanese national morality and the nationalist Japanese state.

Here we face the following question: Can this simply be considered the misguided work of one man and his companions⁵ or might there be an inherent danger hidden in projects of this kind? Let us look at the example of comparative philosophy, for instance. On the one hand, it has always understood itself as trying to build bridges and to demonstrate how notions from different traditions of thought might compare in productive ways. But certainly, historically it was also (intentionally or not) used to arbitrate cultural value: which of these notions is more philosophically (e.g. universally) valid and thus more valuable? And this double intent has come to reinforce not only the dynamics of Orientalism and Eurocentrism, but also of reverse Orientalism and exemplary nationalism, such as the one that ended up guiding Japanese Confucianism (Jiang and O'Dwyer 2025, 187–88).

Raising the question of exemplary nationalism, Jiang and O'Dwyer point out that China itself might be in some danger of repeating these same mistakes of the past.⁶ As they say:

[I]t is no understatement to say that a new *Zeitgeist* has taken root in contemporary China. This *Zeitgeist* is nonetheless an old wine in new bottles, and readers can easily see the return of the spectre that used to haunt 20th-century Japan—the idea that Confucianism, which has long been regarded by Western liberals as a cultural residue particular to East Asia, should actively compete with Western discourses of human rights and democracy and recast itself as a universal value. (Jiang and O'Dwyer 2025, 197)

While the above formulation seems to somewhat hint that Confucianism positioning as a universal ethical theory is always in some danger of recreating the

5 While this is not my position, considerable criticism has been directed at Inoue Tetsujirō by various scholars. For a more nuanced view of both his work and its consequences, see e.g. Shō (2025).

6 However, this too cannot be seen as an inherent characteristic of Confucianism, as exemplary nationalism was also invoked in European philosophy. For example, in the views of Johann Gottlieb Fichte; for a discussion on this, see Jiang and O'Dwyer (2025, 186–87).

dynamics of the past,⁷ it also speaks to the fact that the dynamics in the Japanese Confucian project might not have been completely coincidental and possess a tendency to be reproduced. And while there is no compelling reason to think that those consequences were brought about either by the inherent tendencies of Confucian ethics or philosophy, their relationship does perhaps merit a closer look. Is the problem here simply of methodology,⁸ or does one have to be aware of the inherent nature of this encounter itself: namely, that when we are discussing two different systems of thought, their relationship with the particular and universal can also be deceptively different—and so they can in a sense end up either ignoring, negating or over reinforcing each other's tendencies.⁹

The history of Japanese Confucianism as it struggled with the tension of how to position itself in relation to the particular, universal and exemplary within Confucianism, can be illustrative for the understanding of the specific issues Confucianism might encounter when it is engaged with outside of the Chinese cultural context as its natural centre. To try and provide some insight, I would first like to explore certain elements of Japanese Confucianism that may have led to its fall and tabooization.

More specifically, I would like to explore how the instrumentalization of Confucian ethics was facilitated through the project of Confucianism as “Chinese philosophy” and how it played a role in the development of the imperial way discourse. After that, I would like to look at how universal ethics might have developed in Japan even before the advent of European philosophy, and examine one of its better-known projects and its approaches.

Lastly, I would like to consider how philosophy might engage with ritual as the quintessential and non-abstract Confucian expression of cultural particularity—however, I argue that in this, too, there is a possibility that Confucianism as philosophy can help resolve or at the very least reformulate the inherent tensions.

7 I do not believe that this is the argument being made. Rather, it is that Japanese Confucianism has often been disregarded as an influence within the modern Confucian genealogy, even though its effects can still be felt in certain ways within today's more Sinocentric discourse on Confucianism. O'Dwyer does, however, also warn of the “historically attested ‘pull’ of reconstructed Confucian ideas of statecraft, paternalistic governance, and political perfectionism toward modern authoritarianism” (O'Dwyer 2025, xvii).

8 The question here is whether methodology alone is to blame. For an in-depth discussion of the different issues of comparative, post-comparative and transcultural philosophy and a novel way of solving them, see Rošker (2024).

9 Again, this should not be seen as inevitable or deterministic in any way. Rather, it is a question of whether Confucianism in its totality—without simply asserting a division between philosophical Confucianism and political Confucianism—has a specific kind of relationship to philosophy, in which even philosophically analytical work carries deeper cultural and political implications and therefore should be given due care.

Japanese Confucianism Between Chinese Philosophy and the Imperial Way

I would like to first offer a brief overview of how Japanese Confucianism arrived at where it arrived at, especially regarding the development of the ideology of the imperial way. I will not provide an exhaustive look at this process, as others have done this much better (see e.g. Paramore (2016) for a historical overview; or Chang (2025) for the concrete development of the term) and it would go beyond the scope of this paper. This should simply provide us with the broad strokes of the development of Japanese Confucianism, which can then help facilitate further inquiry.

Looking at Edo period 江戸 (1603–1868) Confucianism,¹⁰ conventional scholarship would divide the scholars and their schools into three currents: the Shushigaku 朱子學 (Zhu Xi Learning), Yōmeigaku 陽明學 (Yangming Learning) and Kogaku 古學 (Ancient Learning). As the names suggest, this would allow us to identify the different Edo period schools and thinkers according to their influences and general ideas, but also according to the part they played in the formation and development of Japanese Confucianism—with Zhu Xi Learning here representing a kind of intellectual mainstream and political orthodoxy.¹¹

However, Kiri Paramore notes that these categories were seldom applied strictly in the historical reality of the Edo period Japan, but rather became reified by historians of the 20th century, notably Inoue Tetsujirō and Maruyama Masao (Paramore 2016, 194, note 2), by focusing mostly on the ideas of different Confucian-identified figures of the time. Paramore also notes that while there is some utility to this approach as a means of linking different trends in Japanese Confucianism to continental ones, analysing the relationships between different interpretations of Tokugawa Confucianism only through these kinds of categorizations occludes many of the most socially and culturally significant aspects of Confucianism's legacy in Japan (ibid., 43).

10 Confucianism did not first arrive in Japan in the Edo period. This happened earlier and influenced the formation of the Japanese state but was also limited to the ruling elite. However, in the Edo period a Neo-Confucian version took hold and saw a period of intense naturalization and development.

11 In his 1952 work *Nihon seiji shisō kenkyū* 日本政治思想研究, later translated into the 1974 *Studies in Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan*, Maruyama Masao proposed a general schema in which the Edo period Confucianism was in fact a gradual disintegration of the universal Zhu Xi mode of thought and a transition in emphasis from “nature” to “invention” (see Maruyama 1974). Maruyama himself later wrote there is doubt to whether the schema will stand up to historical evidence (ibid., xxxv) and Paramore notes that in that book Maruyama's points were “deeply political and present” as he “used the history of Confucianism in Japan as the central plank in his argument against [...] fascist nationalism” (Paramore 2016, 168).

Another approach, taken by Paramore himself, is also possible: that instead of focusing on the *differences of thought* of the different factions, we can try to identify *similarities in practice and context*. He argues that “despite coming from a range of different intellectual schools of Confucianism, and disagreeing with each other on many theoretical issues, in terms of practice, context, and sociality, the Way of Heaven teachings, and the Confucianism of all these figures shared [...] similarities”. Paramore sets out the following common characteristics:

1. A clear focus on Neo-Confucian practice as outlined in key texts edited by Zhu Xi in the Song and developed through practice in Ming Dynasty China: notably the ‘Method of the Heart’ (*xinfa* 心法).
2. A syncretist tendency to present Neo-Confucian practice in relation to, or even as, Shintoism, Military Thought, or other indigenous-Japanese non-Buddhist traditions.
3. A vision of post-Han contemporary imperial Chinese society as a completely separate and ruptured society from the ideal historic Confucian age of Yao and Shun.
4. A related capacity to create a space for Japanese nationalist sensibilities and to criticize contemporary imperial China from a Confucian perspective.
5. Use of Neo-Confucianism to give meaning to the life of samurai in the new peaceful Tokugawa order.
6. Criticized by others as potentially or actually politically subversive. (Ibid., 44)

Kate Wildaman Nakai points out that what is striking about this time is not only how Confucianism was introduced as a new ideology that could support the Tokugawa shogunal rule, but also that so many scholars personally engaged with the way of the sages and tried to use it to resolve the ambiguities of their own status (see Wildman Nakai 1980, 157). And it may have been precisely these ambiguities that fuelled the struggle of Edo period scholars to come to terms with what they saw as the particular and universal aspects of Confucianism. On the one hand it was their interest to make the way of the sages acceptable to Japanese outlook and temperament and to change its more alien elements, while on the other naturalization of those elements could negate the very qualities that personally drew them to Confucianism in the first place (ibid., 159). It is perhaps this attempt at trying to achieve legitimacy for their own position within the Confucian landscape of ideas and role models and to popularize their own readings of them among their people that brought about many of the developments that Confucian concepts saw in Japan.

Paramore points out that such tensions were further exacerbated by the just as tense relationship between Neo-Confucian scholarship and the feudal political system of Tokugawa Japan (ibid., 61). This tension came to influence specific

developments of key Confucian notions. Thus, for example, Yamaga Sokō 山鹿素行 (1622–1685) reinterpreted the notion of the “Middle Kingdom” 中國 (*Zhongguo* / *Chūgoku*) not as China, but as Japan (ibid., 64). Yamazaki Ansai 山崎闇齋 (1619–1682), meanwhile, rejected the Confucian doctrine that allows for justified replacement of an unvirtuous ruler through the working of the Mandate of Heaven 天命 (*tianming*) as not valid in Japan’s particular circumstances (ibid., 61). And Ogyū Sorai 荻生徂徠 (1666–1728) came to define what would later become the new interpretation of the *Dao*: the way of the ancient kings 先王之道 (*sennō no michi*).

Ogyū Sorai was one of the most influential early Edo period scholars and a severe critic of Zhu Xi Neo-Confucianism. This is evident in his reformulation of the interpretation of the *Dao* and his criticism of Confucianism in its capacity for personal cultivation, also evidenced by his non-acceptance of the *Four Books* 四書 (*Sishu/shisho*) as proper canon literature and his strict call for a return to the *Six Classics* 六經 (*Liujing/Rokkei*) and the role models of the pre-Confucian sages. Sorai is important not only for his *kobunjigaku* 古文辭學 (meanings of ancient words and phrases) methodology of critically reading and analysing the Classics, but also for formulating his specific and influential notion of the way.

The way of Confucius is the way of the ancient kings. The way of the ancient kings is the way of providing peace to all under Heaven. (trans. based on Tucker 2006, 139)

孔子之道。先王之道也。先王之道。安天下之道也。 (Ogyū in Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1974, 200)

Ogyū Sorai claims that the way is not the natural way of Heaven and Earth and that it was wholly created by the ancient kings (ibid., 14). He also says that it is manifested in the music, rituals, administrative system and system of punishments that constitute it—there is nothing called the way outside of this (ibid., 201). The way is therefore culturally particular, embodied. However, it also possesses a certain almost miraculous effect—the effect of ordering and of bringing peace to all under Heaven. This effect is not only universal, but also absolute. It is the power to simultaneously order the heart-minds of the people, the society and the world—one simply needs to excavate the true *Dao* through proper methods and then recreate it.¹² It is rather this effect of the way that defines it, not necessarily the concrete manifestations of it—which puts Sorai in a somewhat awkward

12 This was a subject of polemics and Ogyū Sorai was criticized that he advocated for “the way of Yao and Shun” without considering Japan’s national customs and conditions, specifically the divine imperial lineage and blood descent. For Matsumiya Kanza’s critique of Sorai, see for example Song (2025, 7).

position of having to answer the question of how the particular concrete forms of the way relate to its absolute effect, something he himself struggled with (see Wildman Nakai 1980, 199).

However, by claiming that societal order comes from the ancient Chinese kings and only those kings were the great sages of antiquity who brought peace and stability to all under Heaven, Ogyū Sorai also unmistakably ties the kingly way discourse to a kind of religious authority and thus creates a manner in which he can instrumentalize Confucian humanist language in service of the ruling authorities (see e.g. Ogyū in Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1974, 249). Furthermore, instead of the virtue of the current ruler, which is also part of personal development and informs Menicus' ideas of the kingly way, the way of the ancient kings is seen as transmitted from a far-off past, as the work of a sagely revelation and therefore not to be challenged but accepted through faith. Cultivation of people hinges on locating the way in the ancient texts and trying to recreate it in practice—it is a matter of competent statecraft and of recreating proper institutions, while personal moral development does not play a significant part in it.

Sorai thus also rejects Mencius' ideas of "humanness as good" (*xingshan* 性善)—a powerful Confucian idea of universal experience and value—and in effect denies the kind of Confucian humanism that was expanded upon by Song Neo-Confucianism. He also positions himself in the line of those Confucian thinkers who were mostly engaged with ordering the state through legalistic and institutional means and bringing peace to all under Heaven in a top-to-bottom kind of order, though he also does not follow Xunzi's idea of "humanness as bad" (*xinge* 性惡). For example, Sorai writes of self-cultivation:

If we aspire to the way and then hear that humanness is good, we will exert ourselves even more. However, if we hear that humanness is bad, then we will use our strength to correct ourselves. [On the other hand,] if we do not set our will on the way and then hear that humanness is bad, we will abandon any efforts toward goodness and do nothing. Or if we hear that humanness is good, then we will trust to that and make no efforts. Therefore, Confucius valued learning through practice. (trans. based on Tucker 2006, 152)

いやしくも道に志あらんか性善を聞けばすなはちますます勧め、性悪を聞けばすなはち矯めんことを力む。いやしくも道に志なからんか、性悪を聞けばすなはち棄ててなさず性善を聞けばすなはち恃みてなさず。故に孔子の、習ひを貴ふなり。
(Ogyū, in Yoshikawa and Shimizu 1974, 23)

Ogyū Sorai's ideas here offer an important reinterpretation of the Confucian kingly way, as they stress the historical (and, of course, mythical) example of the ancient kings and raise this to a position of a legitimacy-giving principle that can once more supplant the Mencian interpretation of the Mandate of Heaven. And though Sorai remains committed to the role models of Chinese antiquity, he and many of his peers already believed that the rites and music described in the Classics are not the rites and music that were still being practiced in China of their own day—and that perhaps Japan had been better at preserving the unvarnished legacy of the sages and its society-ordering potential (see Wildman Nakai 1980, 174).

At the same time, the concept of the Confucian *Dao* is being transformed in another way.¹³ During the Edo period there is an injection of Shinto ideology into the kingly way discourse, both by the scholars of the Zhu Xi Learning School (such as Hayashi Razan 林羅山 (1583–1657) and Kaibara Ekken 貝原益軒; 1630–1714) and the Yangming Learning School (such as Kumazawa Banzan 熊沢蕃山; 1619–1691). This can roughly be divided into two phases: an early phase in which it was claimed that the Confucian “kingly way” (*wangdao/ōdō* 王道) and the Japanese “way of the gods” (*shintō* 神道) were equivalent, and a later phase in which the kingly way was subordinated to *shintō* (Chang 2025, 95). The Bakumatsu Mito Learning School also stressed the idea of “a nation built on filial piety” (*ibid.*, 101) and began to stress the divide between the Chinese “sage” (*sheng/sei* 聖) and Japanese “divine” (*shen/kami* 神), popularizing the motto “Respect the emperor, expel the barbarians” (*sonnō jōi* 尊王攘夷). Chang argues that this development of the kingly way represents the first contextual turn in the development of the kingly way towards the imperial way—but that, however, at this point the kingly way was still an indispensable reference for the Japanese Confucians (*ibid.*, 107).

The situation changed with the coming of the Meiji period, which perceived Confucianism in a much different way than the Edo period did before it. Firstly, it saw it in some ways as a symbol of the Tokugawa rule against which it had rebelled, since many of the institutions of the Tokugawa state were by the end Confucian. Secondly, steeped in newly absorbed Western scholarship, it started to perceive both Buddhism and Confucianism as religions in the vein of Christianity, which it saw as anti-scientific and thus anti-modern, but also as an important instrument of statecraft in the West and the cornerstone of the Western idea of “civilization” (Paramore 2016, 142). As Paramore points out:

13 For a fuller account of this transformation, see Chang (2025).

The idea of ‘civilization’, key to the Western empires’ arguments of justification for their unequal treatment of Asian countries in nineteenth-century trade and diplomacy, was also heavily reliant on religious ideas. Furthermore, the communication of this idea to the Chinese and Japanese elites during the nineteenth century was mediated by religious institutions, notably Christian missions. [...] This meant that Chinese and Japanese statesmen [...], came to conceive of religion as a key element of Western statecraft. (Ibid.)

This would in turn bring about reforms which were aimed at establishing Shinto as the national religion in Meiji Japan, setting it against Christianity and its ethical teachings, while attacking both Buddhism and Confucianism for their supposed religious and anti-modern characters. The denigration of Buddhism was done on various levels: institutional, liturgical, practice, place, and property. Confucian institutions and religious spaces faced similar repression. Their places and spaces were appropriated around the same time (Paramore 2016, 143). Both Buddhism and Confucianism had to reform and adapt—the proponents of both chose to move away from being perceived as religiously motivated in the above-described “Western” sense.

Moreover, in 1877 the Meiji state would establish Japan’s first modern university, Tokyo University, and it was here that the project of *Shina tetsugaku* 支那哲學 (Chinese philosophy)¹⁴ was born. As Mizuno Hirota points out, while in the first years of the university the Chinese Classics—having slowly lost the scholarly authority that they had held all the way through the Edo period to the ever more popular Western scholarship—were at first only read through textbooks for learning to write Classical Chinese, with Confucian ethics being discarded (Mizuno 2025, 54), this would change around 1885, and the Chinese Classics were once more read for both their form and content, although this would actually have some unexpected consequences.

Inoue Tetsujirō, who was a graduate from and later a professor at the Tokyo University Faculty of Literature, wanted to emphasize the development of Chinese philosophy in parallel with the history of Western philosophy. He was well versed in both traditions, and would use his knowledge to engage in enthusiastic comparative work. However, he also attempted to sever Chinese philosophy from

14 The word “philosophy” as *tetsugaku* 哲學 was coined during the Meiji period, and was an invention of Nishi Amane. The phrase “Chinese philosophy”, which had been widely used in the West already, was back-translated as *Shina tetsugaku* 支那哲學, and this caused some confusion among scholars who were unfamiliar with Western philosophy. As Mizuno points out: “The first to find a way out of this trap, the first in Japan and thus in East Asia to experiment with systematizing Chinese philosophy, was young Inoue Tetsujirō” (Mizuno 2025, 56).

traditional Neo-Confucian influences, especially relativizing the role of Zhu Xi Learning (ibid., 56–57). Inoue is known for his nationalist, militarist and activist¹⁵ interpretations, and is usually seen as someone who would greatly influence the eventual course of Japanese Confucianism.

As Kiri Paramore points out, Inoue transformed the view of Confucianism so that its religious dimensions were no longer standing in the way of Shinto as the new religion of the state. By authoring the *Chokugo Engi* 勅語衍義, the official explanation of the *Imperial Rescript on Education* 教育ニ関スル勅語 (*Kyōiku ni Kansuru Chokugo*), he became a major figure even outside of Japanese academic circles, and his work paved the way for a new instrumentalization of Confucian ethics.

Inoue Tetsujirō followed [the] Buddhist example but went further by denying any religiosity to Confucianism at all. Confucianism was to be regarded purely within the realm of philosophy. This empowered Confucianism even more than Buddhism to stand against Christianity as a symbol of Eastern ethics. Confucianism's remodelling along these lines as a symbol of indigenous East Asian, and particularly Japanese, philosophical morals and ethical politics allowed Confucianism to then be deployed centrally and aggressively in modern society. It allowed Confucian slogans in the ideological texts of the state to be brought to life in political argument, giving them real social meaning and political impact. (Paramore 2016, 151)

Inoue Tetsujirō was one of the first people who articulated the project of Confucianism as philosophy in East Asia—a project of Confucian ethics that could rival the ethical systems of the Western philosophical tradition—and he was also one of the first to engage in comparative philosophy between the European and Chinese traditions. However, he did so in a decidedly nationalistic manner and in a way that would not only completely cut Confucianism from its past practical demands and its cultural background, but would also force it to assert its universal dimensions in the service of a new national morality 国民道德 (*kokumin dōtoku*). His work would help prop up the idea of Japan as the highest example of “Eastern ethics” (as opposed to Western Christian ones) and as the one country to “bring peace to all under Heaven”.

One could claim that once Confucianism was severed from its cultural homeland, the relationship between its particular and universal elements had to inevitably be re-examined, and this finally brought about a project of “Confucianism as

15 For an interesting insight into how Yangming Learning's idea of “unity of knowledge and action” influenced this part of Inoue's project, see Shō (2025, 65–72).

philosophy” that was free from the role models of the past and could assert new ones without worry: in Inoue Testujirō’s hands “Chinese philosophy” functioned as a way to separate the “Chinese” from “philosophy” while asserting its great universality—in which, however, Japanese exemplarity was positioned as an even higher value. As the wisdom of the sages was replaced by the divinity of the emperor, it was also made unquestionable. In its own eyes Japan was taking on the burden of exemplary action that China, having fallen from the height of its ancient glory, could no longer uphold. This discourse gave Japan a permission structure to carry out the ultimate Confucian project and pacify the world, as it and it alone represents the purest expression of the Confucian *Dao*.

Recontextualized to answer the demands of Japan’s global political ambitions, Japanese Confucianism thus receives its highest and most terrible expression in the imperial way discourse. As Chang point out: “The imperial way is in every way, in every place, a product of modernity” (Chang 2025, 107). In trying to square the modern ideas of nationhood with the ancient ideas of the kingly way, the Japanese presented a vision of themselves as the nation above all others: not only exceptional but exemplary in an absolute way.

In the imperial way discourse,¹⁶ which gained real prominence only in the 1930s, the Emperor of Japan becomes the father of all people. He is a living god, who rules by an unending Mandate of Heaven—as the line of imperial rule in Japan is unbroken. In this, humanness and virtue are not considered central—as the virtue of the emperor comes from his bloodline, going back all the way to the goddess Amaterasu Ōkami. As such, only loyalty and filial piety—under the slogan “loyalty and filial piety are one” (*chūkō muni* 忠孝無二), before an emperor that is the great father of all the people under Heaven—are seen as worthy of proper cultivation. The father has the eternal love of the people, and the people need never rebel against him—nor would they ever wish to.

Jiang and O’Dwyer point to the fact that this exemplary nationalism was probably conceived much earlier:

[This] exemplary nationalism tapped into a deep “political-cultural solipsism” [...] inherited from Edo-period Confucianism that envisaged Japan rather than China as the authentic center of the Confucian Way. (Jiang and O’Dwyer 2025, 187)

The horrors of the Japanese imperial regime that culminated in its wars in China and elsewhere go beyond the scope of this paper (but they are explored in some detail in other sources, e.g. Paramore 2016). However, it is important to again

16 I base this summary on Park and Chang’s detailed explications. For a fuller account of the historical intricacies, see Chang (2025) and Park (2025).

note that with the fall of the Japanese imperial system (and the admission of the emperor that he was a man, not a god), Confucianism lost its place in Japanese society (as has been established). Japanese Confucianism lost almost all its power after the war and was relegated to elite academia and a few isolated cases, where it served as a moderately conservative ideology.¹⁷ Today there does not seem to be any real force working for a return of Confucianism to Japanese society, and a revival of Confucianism under that name seems improbable.

This then presents us with one view of the development of Confucian ethics and Confucian philosophy in Japan. And having looked at the specific example of Japanese Confucianism as Chinese philosophy, which brought about the instrumentalization of Confucian ethics, I would now like to consider a different possibility: a development of universal ethics within Japanese Confucianism before the advent of Western philosophy.

Japanese Confucianism as a Universal Ethics Before the Coming of Western Philosophy

In her analysis of the works of Watsuji Testurō 和辻哲郎 (1889–1960), Alexandra Mustătea (2025) points out that competing with Maruyama's vision of the Edo period described above, Watsuji's vision as presented in his *The History of Ethical Thought in Japan* 日本倫理思想史 (*Nihon rinri shisōshi*) has garnered much less attention. This could be because Watsuji's work has been weighed down by accusations of his "proximity" to the Japanese fascist regime, and because his own pre-World War II ideas could be seen as ideologically suspect in this regard as well. The implications should be noted and are worth considering,¹⁸ but I do not believe they disqualify Watsuji's scholarship out of hand.

If Maruyama had at first proposed his vision of Edo period Confucianism as a kind of gradual dissolution of the universal Zhu Xi mode of thought, Watsuji on the other hand sees it as the one instance, when Japanese scholars may have engaged with the development of Confucian ethics in a truly universal way—and in a time before the advent of Western philosophy in East Asia. Emphasizing the two principles of universality (*fuhensei* 普遍性) and particularity (*tokushusei*

17 In a much narrower sense, Confucianism kept fuelling Japanese Conservatism even after the War, as shown by the example of Yasuoka Masahiro. For more on this, see Dufourmont (2025).

18 For an in-depth view of the shift in Watsuji's work pre- and post- World War II, see Shuttleworth (2025). Shuttleworth tries to demonstrate that while Watsuji's pre-war work might be harder to defend, his post-war revision of the second volume of his seminal work *Rinrigaku* 倫理学 (*Ethics*) can be understood to have been developed within a New (or Modern) Confucian framework (ibid., 141). Mustătea also considers the implications of Watsuji's position in her analysis (see Mustătea 2025, 154–56), further providing a more complex and nuanced view of this issue.

特殊性), Watsuji presents his understanding of ethical theory in general. As Mustătea points out, Watsuji believes that

[o]ne must differentiate between two types of ethics: first of all, there is one, universal ethics (*rinri* 倫理), which applies to humanity in its entirety. However, when this universal ethics manifests itself in any given historical context, it cannot escape its own historicity; therefore, it can only manifest itself as an ethical thought (*rinri shisō* 倫理思想), which takes the specific form of the socio-historical context it appeared in. (Mustătea 2025, 157)

Watsuji further argues that studying ethics consequently also needs to have two separate categories: *a history of ethical thought* (*rinrishisōshi* 倫理思想史) and an *ethics* (*rinrigaku* 倫理学), and that this last category is something that originates in the scepticism towards the (ethical) teachings of the sages (ibid.). Possessing scepticism towards the sages (or ethical authorities) is the first step in establishing ethics that transcend the particular and aspire to the universal. And one could argue that this is something that Confucianism has always been capable of, as from the beginning the creative reinterpretation of the teachings of scholars and sages is key to the way Confucianism had developed its concepts and ideas.¹⁹

Mustătea also points out that in his history of ethical thought, Watsuji offers his own, alternative interpretation of Edo period Confucianism:

It is in [the category of *rinrigaku*] that Watsuji carves an important role for Edo-period Confucianism: in Japan, where an ethics did not—strictly speaking—exist until the modern period, Watsuji credits Confucianism with being the closest thing to such an endeavour. In other words, he credits the Confucians of the Edo period with attempting to grasp the principles of universal ethics (*rinri*). (Ibid.)

Watsuji proposes that in the Edo period there were two competing forces in Confucian scholarship: one of tradition and one of creativity. And they went in two opposing directions: orthodox (*kangaku* 官学) and popular (*minshū* 民衆) (ibid., 158). Watsuji sees the popular strand of Confucianism as expressed in the emergence of a new, modern type of consciousness. He also explicitly ties this new type of consciousness to the urban townspeople classes (*chōnin* 町人), and credits Confucianism with the appearance of new *chōnin* intellectuals (ibid.). These

19 Even Confucius stated: “I am a transmitter, rather than an original thinker. I trust and enjoy the teachings of the ancients.” (述而不作、信而好古) (*Lunyu* n.d., 7, 1) However, from the very beginning, he can also be said to have engaged in radical and progressive reinterpretations of key ideas of Chinese antiquity.

intellectuals came to represent “the creative direction, founded on the search for universality and openness to inter-tradition dialogue” (ibid., 159).

One important representative of this creative engagement in Confucian ethics is Itō Jinsai 伊藤仁斎 (1627–1705). Jinsai was a *chōnin* scholar and a critic of the Song Neo-Confucianism, who founded the School of Ancient Confucian Semantics 古儀學 (*kogigaku*). His project can be seen as a specifically *chōnin*-life inspired interpretation of Confucian thought, a Confucian apologia against Buddhist and Daoist ethical ideas, a project of semantic analysis or of philosophical lexicography. Ironically enough, he was also first an inspiration for and later the target of severe critique by Ogyū Sorai.²⁰

It is notable that Jinsai does not fit easily into Paramore’s analysis of the commonalities of Confucian-identified thinkers in Edo period Japan. As Jinsai was not a samurai and did not write directly of or to the samurai class, his ethics are presented in universalist terms, with indirect political messages. John Allen Tucker also sees this as being representative of a worldview belonging to the Edo period townspeople (*chōnin* 町人) class, which was by necessity more inclusive and more diverse (Tucker 1998, 60–61). Jinsai does not overtly connect Confucian practice to Shintoism or other indigenous-Japanese traditions—as Huang Chun-chieh notes, his descriptions of the Confucian *Dao* are turned to the everyday and the secular (Huang 2015, 159). As Maruyama states, Jinsai sees *Dao* as universally human, but also sees the world as historically evolved—he does not see it in a post-Golden Age time of the decline of the way (Maruyama 1974, 59–60). However, it is true that Jinsai himself did keep a fairly low profile, possibly in fear of being criticized by others as potentially or actually politically subversive (Tucker 1998, 61).

Jinsai is a radical proponent of Confucius’ teachings and Mencian humanism. He taught that the *Lunyu* (*Analec*s 論語) was the greatest of all books and that Mengzi 孟子 (Mencius) helped to further explicate its depths. He also denied the religious character of the Confucian way and stressed the *Dao* in the secular daily life of the people (see Huang 2015, 159), based on human feelings as possessing moral qualities. He defined the way in humanist language—as universal human relationships, preserved and perfected through the common effort of practising virtue:

What is the Way? It is humaneness, appropriateness, propriety and wisdom. Humans are encircled by it—they cannot depart from it for even a moment. If they depart from it, then they stop being human. That is why I say: ‘There are no people outside of the Way’.

20 For an in-depth analysis of Jinsai’s project, see Ogrizek (2021).

道とは何ぞ。仁なり。義なり。禮なり。智なり。人其の中に囿して順臬も離るることを得ず。離るときは則ち人に非ず。故に曰く、「道の外に人無し」と。(Itō, in Shimizu 2017, 28)

He also wrote of the *Dao* as the universal expression of human relations:

What are people? They are rulers and ministers, fathers and sons, husbands and wives, older and younger brothers, and friends. But there is only one Way. Between rulers and ministers, we call it appropriateness. Between fathers and sons, we call it love. Between husbands and wives, we call it difference. Between older and younger brothers, we call it proper order. Between friends we call it trustworthiness. All people are encompassed in the Way. If there were no people, the Way could not be seen. That is why I say: ‘There is no way outside of the people’.

人とは何ぞ。君臣なり。父子なり。夫婦なり。昆弟なり。朋友なり。夫れ道は一つのみ。君臣に在っては之を義と謂い、父子には之を親と謂い、夫婦には之を別と謂い、昆弟には之を叙と謂い、朋友には之を信と謂う。皆人に由って顯わる。人無きときは則ち以て道を見ること無し。故に曰く、「人の外に道無し」と。(Ibid., 27)

Also pertinent to Watsuji’s definition: Jinsai did allow himself scepticism towards the teachings of the sages, going so far as to author an essay titled “Daigaku wa Kōshi no isho ni arazaru” 大學非孔子之遺書辨 (“The Great Learning is Not a Confucian Text”).²¹ Jinsai’s analysis here is both semantic and philosophical—it is in line with his project of explicating the universal character of Confucian ethics as embodied in daily life, not a search for something extraordinary. While in a political sense, Itō Jinsai may have been a marginal figure in his time, his work represents some of the most focused development of Confucian ethics considering universal Confucian humanism that Japanese Confucianism has produced.

The lesson of Jinsai’s project is not only in that there may have been a different current of Confucianism at work in the Edo period, one that failed to gain as much influence,²² it is that there was a very different way of engaging with Confucian ethics while existing in roughly the same intellectual milieu of Japanese Confucianism that produced its myriad tensions. It is the idea that while Ogyū Sorai and many others were engaged in trying to reposition the particular elements of

21 See Itō in Yoshikawa and Shimizu (1971, 98–106).

22 Though in Watsuji’s estimation this current did in fact have an influence on the nature of the Meiji rebellion, as shown by the mixed force of the Rebellion, see Mustătea (2025, 159).

Confucianism to argue for a position of heightened legitimacy and exemplarity, Jinsai engaged with the teachings in a sceptical, but honest way and tried to explicate their universal dimensions.

Itō Jinsai's analysis as well as the example of his work may thus give us another perspective on how to deal with the questions of the particular, exemplary and universal of Confucian ethics, and show the dimension Confucianism possessed for universal ethics even in Japan and even before the advent of Western philosophy. This is important—after all, where Confucianism aspires to universality, it should also aspire to universal approachability. While one can claim Confucianism does not need philosophy to explicate its universal values, one can also claim that it is this inherent universal approachability that also positions Confucianism as a kind of philosophy from the start.

Now I would like to go back to the idea that philosophy possesses a blind spot regarding Confucianism, and this blind spot has to do with the particulars of Confucianism's cultural realities.

Confucian Ethics Between Philosophy and Ritual

Having attempted to show two very different expressions of Japanese Confucianism, I would now like to consider whether there is a singular way to learn from their respective lessons. If Japanese Confucianism has something to say about the universal potential of the Confucian ethical project itself, then its greatest insights surely lie in a heightened illumination of the relationships among the particular, the universal, and the exemplary—one that Confucianism, as a philosophy, often seems to overlook. Yet in doing so, Confucian philosophy also risks developing a blind spot with regard to one of the most important aspects of Confucian ethics.

In discussing the nature of Confucianism in the 21st century, O'Dwyer presents Yu Ying-shih's famous metaphor for Confucianism's plight in modern China as a "wandering soul" (*youhun* 游魂), commenting:

What the metaphor conveyed first of all was the insight that Confucianism was dominant in traditional Chinese life only for so long as its 'soul' was institutionalized in various 'bodies'. These bodies included the political and educational institutions of dynastic China, as credentialed Confucian Learning was the gateway to employment in the imperial public service and to regional administrative, literary and educational employments. Such bodies also included the community life of the rural masses, shaped by Confucian rites and folk moralities in family life. The metaphor's second insight was that Confucianism 'cannot remain at the

level of speculation for a long time’ without embodiment in such ways of life.²³ since it is a practice-oriented philosophy dedicated to moral and ritual self-cultivation and to the moral perfectibility of institutions, from the family through to the state. (O’Dwyer 2025, xv)²⁴

I believe this argument should be taken seriously. After all, Confucianism is a tradition that fundamentally posits the transformative power of cultural (ritual) life. However, the other side of this issue also comes into view. The question that plagued Ogyū Sorai, for example, can be formulated as follows: If rites are rooted in a particular cultural origin, from where does their capacity to transform people and to embody exemplary action derive? Do all other rites possess such a capacity, and if so, to what degree? Here, the tension between the universal and particular is perfectly distilled. Sorai ascribed this power to sagely revelation, but rather than reinforcing the universal power of the Dao, his solution conferred upon it an absolute, faith-like character. This question therefore remains: what defines Confucian ritual, what defines Confucian music, and what are their normative powers in a global context?

That being said, Confucianism is also a tradition that holds cultural life to be empty without virtuous conduct. After all, Confucius himself said: “If a man is not humane, what has he to do with ritual? If a man is not humane, what has he to do with music?” (*Lunyu* n.d., 3, 3)²⁵ This would further imply that ritual is not transformative merely by virtue of its form, but rather ritual performed with sincere intent—humaneness and appropriateness working together in unison—is transformative. It is this very transformative rituality that may be closer to what Mencius described as one of the four sprouts of the heart-mind 四端 (*siduan/shitan*) that all people possess (see *Mengzi* n.d., 2A/6). Accordingly, ritual and music cannot be ends in themselves: one practises them with the intent to transform oneself morally and to acquire the ability to respond appropriately in different situations. Nor can they function as an almost magical instrument of transformation in the hands of rulers, as Sorai may have thought.

And in this sense, we might ask whether philosophy can help us describe the kind of ritual that is capable of embodying exemplary action, as opposed to the kind that is not. Can it describe the ways in which ritual embodies virtue? Can it describe the kind of ritual that brings about harmony—or should it merely propose that such ritual exists as an imagined vessel of cultural exemplarity? Or perhaps

23 See also Yu Ying-shih (2011).

24 O’Dwyer also rightly points to Modern Confucianism as the form of Confucian philosophy that brought about significant intellectual development, see O’Dwyer (2025, xv–xvi). However, he also notes that it remains altogether quite Sinocentric.

25 人而不仁，如禮何？人而不仁，如樂何？.

this philosophical idea of ritual—an abstract ritual—should be understood as akin to the idea of the common good: something that, when severed from the concrete ties that bind us together and endowed with an absolute character, can in fact give rise to unintended consequences?

As David B. Wong points out about the common good:

The vision of a society united around a shared and unambiguous vision of a common good is dangerously simplistic and, moreover, ignores bases for community other than such a shared conception. Actual communities are based not only on some degree of agreement in moral belief but also on a shared history, often of struggle and internal conflict, ties of affection of loyalty, or on a limited set of common goals that may be educational, artistic, political, or economic in nature. (Wong 2004)

It seems that a certain tension will always persist between the philosophical dimensions of Confucianism and its cultural (ritual) ones—and while the former can, at worst, be seen as empty speculation, the latter can be seen as binding Confucianism perpetually to its ancient bodies, rendering it unable to reposition itself within the modern, global world (Sernelj 2023, 335). This may, then, be one of the most important lessons that Japanese Confucianism can offer: that these elements together shape the relationship between the universal, the particular, and the exemplary in dynamic and ever-shifting ways, particularly when engaged with outside the Chinese cultural context as its presumed centre. However, even if such tensions cannot be fully resolved, they should not be disregarded.

That being said, perhaps one of the most important lessons that philosophy can articulate is this: that from the perspective of Confucian ethics, what changes most when Confucianism enters the global world may be the very nature of harmony itself. Harmony can no longer be sustained simply by what is familiar, since in an open and pluralistic world the familiar always exists alongside the unfamiliar. Movement between the familiar and unfamiliar demands concessions and transformations, both in the philosophical realm and the cultural one.

In articulating the idea of “Chinese philosophy as world philosophy”, Ishii Tsuyoshi (as translated by Takeshi Morisato and Cody Staton) states the following: “‘Chinese philosophy as world philosophy’ is a project of Chinese philosophy’s change, where it tries to conceptualize a new philosophy from the Chinaworld (Jp. *Chūgoku sekai* 中国世界) perspective” (Ishii 2020-2021, 233). Ishii further posits that “‘world philosophy’ is not a sum total of various philosophies, but a single dynamic system (just as large and small animals and plants constituting the forest in nature symbiotically live based on their organic mutual relation)” (ibid., 232), and also that “world philosophy is [...] at the same time the movement of

the globalization of philosophy through translations” (ibid., 233).²⁶ Even if we do not fully embrace the idea of a “world philosophy”, one could see how “Chinese philosophy as world philosophy” would operate through the act of translation—while the translation of philosophical concepts can be methodologically demanding, it is also philosophically productive.

However, as philosophy moves in an increasingly globalized manner, the question arises: can ritual also acquire a globalized form? It is precisely here that another deep divide becomes visible, since any kind of “translation” appears not merely unproductive but counterproductive—since translation is always more than explanation; it is also transformation. Nor can these tensions be resolved through simple borrowing, as too much can be misunderstood and such endeavours are inevitably subject to cultural power dynamics, whether by diminishing or imposing the force of the exemplary. What, then, is the solution?

Perhaps the solution is not very complicated and can be found in something as simple as an openness to sharing. For it seems that ritual itself could be reconstituted through sharing (such as the sharing of food²⁷). Would such openness resolve, or at least soften, the tensions between the universal dimensions of Confucian ethics and their particular cultural expressions? I believe it might. One could even argue that, for Confucian ethics, this represents a golden opportunity: to observe and articulate anew the role that its transformative rituality might still play in modern life. Ritual itself can be reconstituted in a global context, and the tensions between the universal dimensions of Confucian ethics and its particular expressions softened. Moreover, this can be done in a way that would not negate the various bodies of Confucianism, but would instead reposition and reestablish them within the modern global context.

Finally, returning to Japanese Confucianism, while its active project may be over, I believe that understanding it as fully as possible and engaging with both the thought it articulated and the lessons it produced remains important for the study of Confucianism and its possible future forms in the 21st century. As

26 In this article Ishii also discusses the particular relationship between “philosophy” and “philology” and the role this might play in the project of “Chinese philosophy as world philosophy”. For more on this, see Ishii (2020–2021).

27 After all, could one not see honest sharing as the new face of ritual itself? Imagine how we can now easily travel the world and—when invited—enthusiastically and honestly partake in the rituals of others. One could seek to experience their universal transformative rituality through as many different rituals as one is able to; in this new vision, there are no limits, except for the requirement to remain respectful of what was and is. And perhaps, once we have chosen to participate in and truly understand them, these rituals might reveal an even deeper effect on us and align more closely with our own intent than some of those with which we are so familiar that they have lost all power over us and are simply performed for performance’s sake. In that case, upon returning to our own rituals, we might also find their transformative power newly invigorated.

such, and without a doubt, Japanese Confucianism represents a valuable resource—even if its greatest and most troubling expression is rightly understood as a cautionary tale.

Conclusion

I have tried to show a certain relationship that Japanese Confucianism has had with Confucian ethics and Confucianism as philosophy: first from the point of view of the development of Confucianism as Chinese philosophy, which was part of the instrumentalization of Confucian ethics by the Japanese national morality and imperial way discourses; second from the point of view of the inherent universality of Confucian ethics, as explored and developed during the Edo period by the *chōnin* intellectuals; and lastly as an explication of the question of philosophy and ritual that Japanese Confucianism helped to illuminate.

In pointing out certain elements of the transformation of the Chinese kingly way into the Japanese imperial way, I aimed to highlight those elements of the process that underscore how Confucianism transforms when it is dealt with by scholars outside the Chinese cultural space; but also, the potential ways in which through this Confucianism as philosophy might become vulnerable to political instrumentalization.

I then looked at a Confucian project that in my view had managed to engage with Confucian ethics on the grounds of their own universal character. Following Watsuji Testurō's positioning of Edo period Confucianism as having produced a current of discourse on universal ethics before the advent of European philosophy, I presented one such project as represented by the teachings of the *chōnin* scholar Itō Jinsai. I tried to show how it was both steeped in the universal language of Confucian humanism and possessed a sceptical approach towards the teachings of the sages, exemplifying a universal ethical approach.

Lastly, I tried to explicate how the example of Japanese Confucianism might help us examine the ways in which philosophy could address the divide between the universal and particular aspects of Confucian ethics, instead of turning a blind eye to them. Here I offer my own view of one facet of Confucian ritual, which would allow Confucianism to free itself of its particular constraints not in a way that would deny its ancient bodies, but in a way that would reestablish them within a plurality.

Finally, I have argued that while Japanese Confucianism may have been relegated to the ivory towers of academia and in most ways is not a living project any longer, it can still inform our study of Confucian ethics and its universal dimensions—even beyond being an important cautionary tale.

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