
Kanbun* and Translation: Revisiting Naoki Sakai's *Voices of the Past

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I reread Naoki Sakai's *Voices of the Past* (1992) in order to examine its theoretical implications and to critically engage with the debate it has evoked. I focus on his analysis of how a new regime of translation gave rise to the discourse on a national language in eighteenth-century Japan. I first explain the hybrid nature of *kanbun kundoku*, a technique of making classical Chinese read like Japanese. I then discuss the Japanese Confucian scholar Ogyu Sorai, showing how his new phonetic method of reading and translating *kanbun* was implicated in eliminating *kundoku* and drawing the very boundary between "Japanese" and "Chinese." I also examine the debate concerning Sakai's interpretation of Sorai as a phonocentric thinker. Although some scholars insist that Sorai emphasized the visual aspect of Chinese texts and thereby abandoned the phonetic method, I argue that Sorai's approach to writing was still modeled after speech and the act of enunciation. Finally, I explain his practice of translation in terms of what Sakai calls the "schema of configuration," a regime of constructing linguistic and cultural binary oppositions, such as Japanese and Chinese, the "West" and the "non-West," and so forth.

KEYWORDS Naoki Sakai, Ogyu Sorai, phonocentrism, translation, schema of configuration

Ex-position, Issue No. 40, December 2018 | National Taiwan University
DOI: 10.6153/EXP.201812_(40).0004

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Ex-position
December
2018

Japan's Intellectual Climate in the 1980s

The rise of critical theory in the 1980s had far-reaching impacts on Japan studies because it helped put into question a set of assumptions about modern nations and their cultures, relativizing and historicizing the taken-for-granted existence of what is called “Japan,” “Japanese language,” and “Japanese people.”

Looking back on Japan in the 1980s, we note that it celebrated the advent of “postmodernism” and consumer society. After decades of postwar reconstruction and high economic growth, Japan reemerged in the international world as an economic power. It seemed as if modernity and modernization were no longer the societal goals yet to be achieved. In Japanese academic circles there was a rising group of young intellectuals labelled “new academism” who possessed a command of theoretical idioms and were committed to decoding signs and symptoms of high capitalism. On the other hand, as modernist intellectuals who had championed postwar democracy, most notably the political scientist Maruyama Masao, gradually lost their influence, conservative ideologues gained more power and affirmed Japan’s cultural uniqueness as a source for its economic performance. Parallel to these shifts—as the nascent neoliberal globalization promoted joint research projects across national borders and academic disciplines—were diverse currents in critical theory, including semiology, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, feminism, post-Marxism, among others, which provided analytical tools and theoretical frameworks for this new international collaboration, particularly in the humanities. These circumstances contributed to conditions for relativizing the national border and questioning the myth of a homogenous nation.

In the intellectual climate in and surrounding the 1980s and 1990s Japan, the impact of Naoki Sakai’s works was remarkable. Along with his mentors Tetsuo Najita and Harry Harootunian of the University of Chicago, Sakai was one of the pioneers to seriously engage with “theory” in the fields of Japan studies, and Tokugawa intellectual history in particular. A series of Sakai’s writings, including *Voices of the Past*, can be regarded as one of the most radical theoretical attempts to address the issues of modernity and nationalism. This is because he historicized the discursive constructs of “Japan” and “Japanese,” unsettling the widely shared fantasy of a homogenous Japan. Interwoven with this critical intervention, Sakai never loses sight of the memories and aftermath of Japan’s colonial empire and the total war, or the geopolitical context of East Asia. Moreover, alongside other prominent intellectuals, such as Rey Chow, Sakai has been one of the most influential figures in critical and postcolonial theory from East Asia. In addition, inspired by Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and Stuart Hall’s discussion of the “West and the Rest,” Sakai has

tirelessly problematized the system of knowledge production under the hegemony of the so-called “West.” With his hallmark concept of “schema of configuration,” he has provided a powerful framework to critically analyze this structure. With the rise of populism and xenophobia across the globe today, as well as the decline of the Western hegemony, his discussions, especially his staunch criticism of nationalism, are now all the more important.

Voices of the Past

In his seminal work *Voices of the Past: The Status of Language in Eighteenth-Century Japanese Discourse* (1992), Naoki Sakai discusses the genesis of the very idea of the “Japanese language.” He distinguishes several important moments for this process. The notion of a national language was born of the rise in interest in human speech and the subjects of enunciation in the eighteenth-century discourse. He also shows how important techniques, such as quotation marks and the distinction between direct and indirect speech, became available and helped thematize speech during this period. This focus on speech created a phonocentric desire for language. Until the eighteenth century, however, there had been no unity of national language in Japan, Sakai claims, and verbal practices were coupled with diverse forms of textualities, not only verbal and oral, but also non-verbal, bodily, aural, and visual. This hybrid materiality of texts was not controlled and integrated by a speaking subject.

What is more, the “Japanese” culture and language since antiquity had been heavily dependent upon “Chinese” civilization, which not only brought Buddhist and Confucian texts to Japan, but also enabled the writing system based on *kanji* or Chinese characters. Furthermore, *kanbun* (漢文) or classical Chinese and its texts remained the most important part of their education for Japanese intellectuals. They read *kanbun* and even wrote poetry in *kanbun*. The practice of *kanbun* did not follow a neat distinction between Japanese and Chinese, thus forestalling linguistic purity. This is why Sakai argues that the formation of a national language must be preceded by the act of “translation,” of creating the very boundary between itself and another language.

Japanese Confucian scholar Ogyu Sorai played a pivotal role in performing this task of translation. His school of *kobunjigaku*, namely the study of ancient rhetoric, advocated reading *kanbun* as a foreign language by introducing a phonetic method of reading. Although he was motivated by the desire for things Chinese, his new reading practice aimed to get rid of *kanbun kundoku*, that is, a special method of reading *kanbun* with Japanese annotations, neatly separating two linguistic realms. Along with *kokugaku*, the school of the national learning led by Motoori Norinaga,

Sorai's *kobunjigaku* transformed the discourse on language, giving rise to the modern consciousness of a national language.

In this essay, I would like to look at how the new regime of translation reorganized the discursive space in eighteenth-century Japan. I will first describe the practice of *kanbun kundoku* at that time, clarifying its deeply hybrid nature. I will then focus on the Japanese Confucian scholar Ogyu Sorai and his new method of *kanbun* reading with a phonocentric principle. I will show how his new system paved the way for drawing the very boundary between Japanese and Chinese as different languages. At the same time, Sorai was driven by the desire to transform himself into a "Chinese." I will also touch upon a fierce debate concerning the view of Sorai as a phonocentric linguist and philosopher. Finally, I will explain the new regime of translation in terms of what Sakai calls the "schema of co-figuration."

The Absence of "Japanese"

Naoki Sakai begins with a fundamental historical observation that in Japan until the eighteenth century, there had been no real cultural unity based on a unified national language. Although by the early seventeenth century, the Tokugawa shogunate had unified the territory and isolated itself from other countries with a few exceptions, the archipelago was still divided into more than two hundred domains with distinct cultures and languages. Northern and Southern islands of Ezo (present Hokkaido) and Ryukyu (Okinawa) had not yet been incorporated into Japan proper. Within a domain, there were class divisions into samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants who spoke in different styles. These conditions created vast verbal differences among the various domains and within each domain. Speech and writing under this regime were also fundamentally different, because the very notion of *genbun itchi* or the unification of the written and spoken language would not be invented until the late nineteenth century (Lee 23-69). The Japanese writing system was, and still is, inscribed by the duality of *kanji* (Chinese characters) and two forms of *kana* (*hiragana* and *katakana*); the latter derived from simplification and abbreviation of *kanji*. There is, in other words, no denying Japan's enormous debt to the Chinese writing system. In sum, the Japanese archipelago, Sakai maintains, was characterized by linguistic hybridity and heterogeneity, and the lack of a unified Japanese.

***Kanbun* as a Hybrid Textuality**

One excellent example of linguistic hybridity in eighteenth-century Japan is *kanbun*,

or classical Chinese. *Kanbun* occupied the position of lingua franca in East Asia, comparable to Latin in medieval Europe. Since antiquity, the Buddhist and Confucian texts transmitted from China formed the essential part of education and knowledge for Japanese aristocrats and samurai soldiers. The educated elite not only read the texts in classical Chinese, but also wrote Chinese-style poetry and prose themselves. Official documents of the government were often written in classical Chinese style. While in the Tokugawa period, the system of Neo-Confucianism by Zhu Xi and others became the official ideology, Japanese intellectuals, most notably Ito Jinsai and Ogyu Sorai, sought to provide alternatives to this doctrine for a better and more authentic reading of ancient Confucian texts.

A peculiar, and quite ingenious, method of reading and translating *kanbun* called *kanbun kundoku* (漢文訓読 or just *kundoku*; also *wakun* 和訓) had been developed in Japan since “Chinese” and “Japanese” had markedly different structures, including the word order; the former often uses the order of subject-verb-object while Japanese uses subject-object-verb.¹ *Kundoku* is basically composed of two operations: 1) inverting the word order by putting a set of *kaeriten* or return markers to the original, and 2) adding *okurigana* showing *kana* suffixes for *kanji* stems, as well as Japanese particles. Using these supplementary techniques, *kundoku* makes *kanbun* read like Japanese.

Sakai argues that *kundoku* represents a highly hybrid form of reading in a double sense. First, it transforms the original text into a non-verbal and visual text. *Kundoku*, in inverting the word order, does not follow the very linearity that characterizes a verbal text. Writing in *kanbun* is viewed and used in its visual and spatial materiality, not reducible to sounds and phonemes. Second, *kundoku* not merely alters the original “Chinese”; it cannot be viewed primarily as “Japanese” either. *Kundoku*, Sakai emphasizes, “is a rather parasitic and foreign language within Japanese and constantly disturbs the possible constitution of an interior” (225). The question as to whether *kundoku* belongs to Chinese or Japanese is meaningful if and only if one draws a neat boundary between them, thereby distinguishing two separate entities. However, such a separation is precisely what *kundoku* resists and undoes. Moreover, this question would commit an anachronism of retrospectively projecting the present assumption onto the past, because “Japanese” as a national language was not yet established in the eighteenth-century discursive space.

¹ A prototype of *kundoku* had already been invented in the Korean Peninsula in order to translate Chinese Buddhist scriptures. It is quite likely that the *kundoku* technique was also brought to Japan at some point in history when they imported the Buddhist and Confucian texts from Korea. It is also worthy to note that different forms of *kundoku* were practiced not only in Japan but also across premodern East Asia, including Korea, Vietnam, Qidan, and Uyghur. See Kin.

Ogyu Sorai and a Modern Regime of Translation

In eighteenth-century Japan, a new form of *kanbun* reading was developed. Sakai focuses on Ogyu Sorai (荻生徂徠, 1666-1728), who played a pivotal role in this regard. A political advisor to Tokugawa shoguns, Sorai was one of the eminent Confucian scholars in this era. Sorai established his name with his innovative method of reading and teaching Chinese classics. He first formulated his approach in the preface to his early work *Yakubunsentei* (訳文筌蹄 *A Tool for Translation*, 1715), a glossary of Chinese vocabularies.² Sorai himself studied spoken Chinese at that time and proposed to directly read *kanbun* without using the *kundoku* method. In short, he advocated the abolishment of *kundoku* altogether. In his later years, inspired by Ming scholars Wang Shin-chen and Li P'an-lung, Sorai developed his hermeneutic method called *kobunjigaku* (古文辞学), the study of ancient rhetoric. In his magnum opus *Bendo* (弁道 *A Discourse on the Way*, 1717), Sorai recollects his encounter with their work:

Blessed by the Wonderous spirit of Heaven, I managed to obtain the writings of Wang Shin-chen and Li P'an-lung and through them discovered, for the first time, the existence of ancient literature. Since then I have read the Six Classics in small amounts over a long period of time and gradually acquired the ability to comprehend the relationship between terms and reality. (Najita 3)

As Tetsuo Najita clarifies, Sorai's political philosophy is characterized by moral historicism, which derives from his insight into historical changes of language (xxvii-xxix). His philological studies of the Six Classics resulted in his major works *A Discourse on the Way* and *Benmei* (弁名 *Clarification of Names*, 1720). In these writings, Sorai insisted that the then-dominant Neo-Confucian interpretations often misunderstood and distorted the original meaning of Confucian texts. It was important, Sorai believed, to recover this genuine thought whose language had been made opaque and inaccessible to contemporary readers.

Naoki Sakai argues that Sorai proposed to abolish *kundoku* or *wakun* by introducing a new regime of translation. To this end, Sorai treated *kanbun* as a distinct foreign language while rendering it in colloquial Japanese. He thus eliminated *kundoku*, clearly drawing a line between Chinese and Japanese. Sakai's emphasis

² This volume, based on Sorai's lecture notes in his late twenties, was finally published with a new preface added, when he was in his mid-forties. The title *sentei* or *quanti* literally means "bamboo fish trap and hoof," an allusion to *Zhuangzi*.

on his philosophy of language critically follows Japanese Sinologist Kojiro Yoshikawa's important study, which invited a number of responses from Sorai scholars. I will touch upon the debate concerning Sorai's phoneticism later.

The Method of Nagasaki Translators

In *A Tool for Translation*, Sorai expressed his general reservations about the traditional *kanbun* reading in Japan: "Scholars in this country read Chinese books in their dialects, calling it *wakun* (和訓 Japanese annotation). They take it as annotation. In fact, however, it is translation" (16/24).³ Here Sorai seems to state the obvious: "This country has its own language, China its own. Their basic structures are essentially different. . . . For this reason, although it may appear as if Japanese annotation's inverted reading (和訓廻環之読) could comprehend Chinese, it is in fact forced and far-fetched" (17/24). The point is to recognize that before Sorai, this observation was never obvious, which provides important support for Sakai's thesis that the distinction between the national languages had not yet been established. Moreover, he makes the important point that the Chinese themselves do not know the "original features" of their language. Here Sorai insists that one can first objectify one's own language by looking at it from the other's point of view. What Sakai calls the "schema of co-figuraiton" emerged here, which I will discuss shortly.

The way in which Sorai eliminated *kundoku* is crucial. It is precisely here that he resorted to a phonetic principle, instead of the visual techniques of *kundoku*. What Sorai called *Kiyo no gaku* (崎陽之学) or the method of Nagasaki translators was groundbreaking. First and foremost, Sorai sought to abolish the *kundoku* reading because he thought it prevented Japanese students from reading the original *kanbun* text "from the top straight down." As an alternative, he proposed to read aloud and recite the original texts in Chinese, which he believed would enable direct and linear understanding of them. Here he clearly understood Chinese characters as phonetic signs. In other words, he did not subscribe to the vulgar notion that sees them exclusively as ideographs. As I will point out, it does not necessarily mean that Sorai ignored the visual, ideographic, and stylistic aspects of Chinese characters and texts. However, it is important to acknowledge that Sorai in this early work highlights the primacy of *speech* for the understanding of Chinese as a foreign language. In this respect, Sorai's argument came close to what Jacques Derrida once called phonocentrism.⁴ Significantly, Sorai learned *Towa* (唐話 the speech

³ My translation. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own. Two page numbers after Sorai quotes correspond to the *kanbun* original and its *kakikudashi* or a classical Japanese rendering of the text.

⁴ In his discussion of Husserl's phenomenology, Derrida critically analyzes phonocentrism as the primacy of

of Tang) through Nagasaki translators who served as interpreters for Chinese merchants.⁵ Although in earlier times linguistic and cultural exchanges between Japan and China were far from rare, Sorai's attempt to learn spoken Chinese might come as a surprise given the lack of diplomatic ties between Tokugawa and the Qin Dynasty. In short, Sorai proposed and tried to practice a speech-oriented language learning method that is widely practiced today.⁶ In *A Tool for Translation*, he specifically describes his alternative method for the beginners:

First, I practice the method of Nagasaki translators, teaching my students in colloquial language and reciting the texts in Chinese pronunciation. I translate them into our vernacular language and never ever conduct the inverted reading in Japanese annotation. . . . Only when they have already mastered the method of Nagasaki translators will they be able to make themselves into Chinese people (中華人). (20/28)⁷

In this way, the method of Nagasaki translators introduces a way of reading Chinese aloud and in a linear way, thereby eliminating the visual and spatial reading of *kundoku*. Sorai gave instructions that a translation in Japanese should be provided alongside a

the self-present voice exempt from the signification process as well as the exclusion of writing. "The name of the element is the voice. Phonic signs ('acoustical images' in Saussure's sense, or the phenomenological voice) are heard by the subject who proffers them in the absolute proximity of their present" (76). Simply put, it refers to "hearing-oneself-speak" (80).

⁵ He learned it from several Nagasaki translators, most notably Okajima Kanzan, who was also a student of Sorai and who compiled *Towa sanyo*, a textbook for the speech of Tang. See Tajiri, *Ogyu Sorai* 19; Tajiri, "Kundoku mondai" 225-27; Okada 45.

⁶ It is important to note, however, that Sorai's practice needs to be reconsidered in the context of East Asia. In fact, reading the original in Chinese and providing its vernacular translation was a widespread method in the Korean Peninsula. By the sixteenth century, since the creation of the Korean alphabet by King Sejong in 1446, this method called 諺解 (*genkai*, or *onhe* in Korean) was established, which replaced *kundoku* that had been used in Korea until then. It seems that not only Sorai but also several other Japanese intellectuals since the late Muromachi period, including Zen priests and Confucian scholars, notably Hayashi Razan, already knew about this remarkable trend. Significantly, as a young student, Sorai read and studied 大学諺解 (*Daigaku genkai* or *Vernacular Explanations of the Great Learning*), which happened to be among his father's book collections. His perusal of the book made it possible for him to "comprehend a wide range of Chinese classics without access to lectures by teachers" (*A Tool* 16/23). See also Pastreich 144. This text is assumed to be a work by Hayashi Razan. Kojiro Yoshikawa wrongly conjectures, it seems, that the book might be a commentary on the *Great Learning* in colloquial Chinese (645). Therefore, it is highly likely that Sorai was directly or indirectly inspired by the discourse concerning the abolition of *kundoku*. See Kin 94-109.

⁷ The English translation by Emanuel Pastreich is not very accurate here. "One must follow the Nagasaki method of Chinese language study, employ vernacular Japanese in the classroom, read Chinese texts according to Chinese pronunciation, translate Chinese texts into vernacular Japanese and, at all costs, avoid *wakun* annotation. . . . If the teacher then moves on to the four basic categories of books, the Classics, the teachings of the masters, the histories, and the individual collections, the student will go through them like a knife through butter" (156-57). Pastreich omits a key passage: "Only when they have already mastered the method of Nagasaki translators will they be able to make themselves into Chinese people."

kanbun text—not in classical Japanese, as in the case of *kundoku*, but in a vernacular language accessible to contemporary students. This method of translation facilitated the elimination of *kundoku* as a hybrid of Chinese and Japanese, bringing about the separation between the interior and the exterior in terms of language. Sakai argues that such boundary-making was one of the prerequisites for the emergence of a national language, or even the idea of “language” in general.

Significantly, however, Sorai insisted that this method of translation would enable the students to become “Chinese people.” That is to say, the ability to speak Chinese is virtually equated with a qualification for being “Chinese.” In this sense, this phonetic method of language learning was understood to be a mimetic principle. Even as he introduced a modern regime of translation differentiating national languages, he still believed that it would make it possible for the learners to identify with the other language and people. In *Shibun kokujitoku* (詩文国字牘 *Japanese Letter on Poetry and Prose*), another essay with virtually the same content but written in Japanese, Sorai even says that with the mastery of the Nagasaki learning, “they will be able to become one with Chinese people” (627). “The core of his new teaching method,” Sakai thus maintains, “consisted of mimetic identification with the imagined subject of enunciation who produced the text in its originary plenitude in ancient China” (229). As a Confucian scholar, Sorai imagined and idealized China as the country of the ancient kings. In his later work *Gakusoku* (学則 *Instructions for Students*, 1717), he famously says, “Japan has never produced a sage. The West has never produced a sage. This is because only the ancient literature, records, proprieties, and music constitute the correct teaching” (188; Minear 11). In *A Discourse on the Way*, he declares that sages existed in ancient China: “The Way that Confucius taught is the Way of the Ancient Kings, and the Way of the Ancient Kings is to bring peace into the world” (12; Najita 4). However, ancient China and contemporary Japan were far apart from each other both temporally and spatially. Hence his historicism: “The times change, bearing the words along; the words change, bearing the Way along. That ‘the Way is not clear’ is due chiefly to this fact” (*Instructions* 190; Minear 16). This is why Sorai believed it necessary to read Confucius in original Chinese. It was his pursuit for authentic speech that brought about the desire to enter this communal interiority. Language as inscribed in the Six Classics was a gateway to practical knowledge about ancient China, its customs, life conditions, and institutions, which Sorai called *mono*, namely things. “The Six Classics represent realities [*mono*]. The Way exists in their specific details” (*Instructions* 192). Such knowledge would be acquired through the act of enunciation as a mimetic identification. Here speech is understood not just as the sound of a voice, but essentially as a bodily performance.

What Sorai accomplished in the early eighteenth-century Japan, Sakai claims, had a far-reaching effect: “the introduction of a regime equipped with set protocols and a translation scheme” (*Voices* 218). Out of this regime of translation, according to Sakai, emerged the modern notion of a national language, which required two conditions:

First, the interior and the exterior must not overlap at all; they must be external to each other; there must be no common factor belonging to both at the same time. Second, both the interior and the exterior must form a closure, so that each can be talked about as a totality, a unity; however complicated or cast it may be, its totality must be conceivable. (220)

His obsessive interest in directly reading and understanding Chinese through speech brought about the separation between Chinese and Japanese, a prerequisite for Japanese as a distinct national language. Perhaps, in spite of himself, Sorai prepared for the latter’s relative independence from the former, a tendency that the nativist Motoori Norinaga would aggressively pursue. Yet, what Sorai tried to produce was not just a distinction between us and them, but the very desire for the linguistic other. He organized language learning as a practice of mimesis. It was Sorai’s preoccupation with speech and phoneticism that brought about the desire for language.

Debates on Sorai’s Phonocentrism

The view of Sorai as a phonocentric linguist and philosopher has evoked a long-standing debate that continues to this day. Here let us first listen to the dissenting voices and then look at how Sakai would respond to his opponents.

In his discussion of Sorai’s approach to language, Sakai seems largely indebted to the Sinologist Kojiro Yoshikawa, who emphasizes the centrality of the method of Nagasaki translators for Sorai’s thinking. His 1973 essay, “Sorai gakuan” (“Sorai’s Scholarship”) emphasizes that Sorai sought to acquire the Way of ancient kings as expressed in the ancient language of the Six Classics. Yoshikawa succinctly summarizes Sorai’s standpoint:

The conventional method of *kundoku* that puts *kaeriten* and *oku-rigana* to Chinese characters, thereby translating them into Japanese, represents alteration and destruction of the Chinese language. It must be eliminated. All [*kanbun*] must be read in its original tone, original intonation, and original word order. (633)

He also suggests,

Since the Confucian texts are written in Chinese, Sorai concludes, what is required are ideally ‘the method of Nagasaki translators’ based on direct reading in Chinese pronunciation, and secondarily the ‘study of translation’ through Japanese vernacular that he newly advocates. (651)

*Kanbun and
Translation*

Although highly appreciating his point on the phonetic method, Sakai does not necessarily agree with Yoshikawa’s notion that “the phonetic reading is superior to wakun” (*Voices* 226). Sakai also challenges his assumption that “Sorai’s particular view of spoken Chinese is transhistorically valid” (226). This is quite dubious, Sakai argues, because the very notion of Chinese as a primarily spoken and unitary language was far from predominant in the eighteenth century. On the contrary, the Chinese continent at that time was characterized by the coexistence of diverse verbal and textual practices as well as regional dialects that lacked any linguistic standardization through phoneticism. That is to say, Yoshikawa’s positivist approach tends to project the modern horizon onto the past, taking for granted the very existence of the same spoken Chinese throughout history. Sakai, in contrast, seeks to problematize the historicity of the phonocentric discourse on language that Sorai helped to formulate. In short, whereas Yoshikawa endorses Sorai’s phoneticism, Sakai critically analyzes and historicizes its ideology.

A number of Sorai scholars, however, have challenged the very notion of phoneticism in Sorai, a paradigm which Yoshikawa established and that Sakai critically followed. In his rather acrimonious review on Sakai’s *Voices of the Past*, Herman Ooms claims that “Sorai unambiguously privileged the eye over the ear” (397), citing a passage from *Instructions for Students*: “Do not use mouth or ear, but consider the texts with heart and eye; . . . as if by divine inspiration you will perceive their meaning . . . we must try to listen to them with our eyes” (190; translation by Minear 14-15). “By no stretch of the interpretation,” Ooms asserts, “could prohibition against ‘using mouth or ear’ and the injunction to ‘listen with your eyes’ be construed as a call for phoneticism” (397-98). He continues to quote another *locus classicus* from Sorai’s *A Tool for Translation*, which virtually every commentator refers to:

The Chinese often say “read books, read books.” I would rather say that reading books is not as good as viewing them. This is because Chinese and our language are not identical in pronunciation. Therefore, our mouth and ears are

not capable enough. A pair of eyes alone is not different among all the people from three thousand worlds. (21/29)⁸

This theory of “viewing books/texts” (看書) seems to provide a strong case against the phonetic interpretation of Sorai. Likewise, Yuichiro Tajiri claims that Yoshikawa completely ignores the relevance of this passage (259). Tajiri also criticizes his reading of Sorai, arguing that Yoshikawa himself brings in a dichotomy and hierarchy between the phonetic reading of Chinese and its translation in vernacular Japanese (227). By the same token, Hung-Yueh Lan (Kogaku Ran) elaborates on this theory of text viewing.

In Sorai’s view, “words” (辭) as “radiant literary figures” (ancient words, classical language, and the Tang poetry) could not be translated into Japanese at the time. Sorai presented his theory of text viewing as a genuine translation to understand *kanbun* expressions pregnant with figurative language (修辭). (96)

Lan thus concludes, “if one pays attention to his theory of ‘text viewing,’ it is already obvious that Sorai was not phonocentric” (97).

Speech and Writing as Intertextuality

It is certainly true that Sorai’s approach to *kanbun* was never reducible to reading aloud in Chinese. However, these commentators tend to presuppose a rather simplistic understanding of phonocentrism. When they refer to “phonocentrism,” they understand it just as a reduction of language into sounds. Sakai warns against such a vulgar notion of phonocentrism as mere negation of letters and adherence to phonetic language. “The crux of phonocentrism,” he maintains, “does not lie in one-sided emphasis on sounds, but in its very assumption that writing and sounds can be distinguished” (*Shizan* 250). In other words, the binary opposition between these two implies a hierarchy between primary and secondary, presence and its

⁸ My translation. The original *kanbun* is as follows (I use modern Japanese *kanji* forms and omit return markers that the editors provide): “中華人多言。読書読書。予便謂読書不如看書。此縁中華此方語音不同。此方耳口二者。皆不得力。唯一双眼。合三千世界人。総莫有殊” (21). Pastreich translates the passage this way: “Chinese speak frequently of reading books aloud. I would say that what we Japanese do is better thought of as ‘looking at books’ than ‘reading aloud books.’ The sounds of Chinese and Japanese are so completely different. Therefore the aural and oral aspects of reading do not develop for Japanese. Only the eyes take part in the act of reading. There is not one exception in three thousand Japanese” (160). Pastreich’s interpretation is that Sorai is here describing Japanese students’ inability to read books aloud in Chinese. His translation also makes it look as if the “eyes” only referred to those of the Japanese. In his introduction to the translation, he does not mention the debate on this theory of “viewing books.”

representation, which needs to be deconstructed. Indeed, if one follows Derrida's argument as Sakai does, writing inevitably returns as a supplement that makes speech possible in the first place. Therefore, one cannot exclude writing and textuality from speech and language. It is as a matter of course that Sorai came to discover the significance of writing for *kanbun*.

More substantially, the problem Sakai sets out to solve is what motivated Sorai to eliminate *kundoku* in the first place. Without recourse to the phonetic method, Sorai would not have been able to eliminate *kundoku*. Ooms and others insist that Sorai later abandoned the method of Nagasaki translators, but they tend to ignore or underestimate the fact that Sorai maintained his rejection of *kundoku* throughout his career.⁹ Indeed, at the beginning of *Instructions for Students*, he reiterated his attack on the *kundoku* method (188-90). If this is the case, *Kiyo no gaku* constituted a rupture for Sorai, preventing him from returning to the *kundoku* method. To be sure, the practice of text viewing and *kobunjigaku* represented an important development for Sorai, showing his deepening insight into writing and intertextuality. Yet, can the otherwise conventional method really provide a sufficient reason and motive to get rid of *kundoku*? Or rather, does this theory presuppose the understanding of classical Chinese as a verbal and linear text that was made possible by *Kiyo no gaku*?

Sakai's main argument is that Sorai sought to eliminate *kundoku* because he was driven by a desire for *speech*. He explicitly rejects a rather simplistic notion of phonocentrism that reduces speech into sounds and pronunciation.

Sorai pursued language as an act of enunciation, in a way that enables pronunciation as much as possible. But that does not necessarily mean that he tried to recover pronunciation per se. Rather, he should conceive of it as a social act of enunciation, that is, speech. The question of pronunciation is a gateway to speech. (Koyasu et al. 64)

Therefore, whether or not pronunciation actually takes place does not necessarily matter. Indeed, speech needs to be understood not just as a phonetic phenomenon, but more broadly as a bodily, habitual, and social performance. That is to say, speech must be comprehended as speech act in its full sense. As Sakai shows in *Voices of the Past*, the eighteenth-century Japan witnessed a rising interest in speech

⁹ If he seemed to abandon the method of Nagasaki translators, one major reason for this was probably a realistic consideration concerning the lack of access to Chinese speakers for many students, especially in the countryside. Another was his encounter with *kobunjigaku* and the problematic of intertextuality between the present-day and ancient Chinese writings.

not in terms of the enunciated, but as the act of enunciation. Since a verbal utterance was always already embedded in a nonverbal situation, the relationship between an enunciation and its situation became an obsessive concern in various genres of contemporary literature and theatre, bringing about a new mode of intertextuality.

Sakai shows how Sorai's approach to writing was deeply affected by this changing view of speech as textual and intertextual practice. "By reducing a written text to speech," Sakai says, "he attempted to inaugurate a new conception of comprehension and to open a field in which a text is grasped primarily as an enunciation" (231). Here ancient texts, such as the Six Classics, are understood as a preservatory of past voices and enunciations. "Through vocalization, Ogyu believed, one could return from the writing to the original scene of the enunciation" (232). Vocalization is always already revocalization of a trace preserved in the text. In a letter to Hori Keizan, Sorai explains his approach to writing inspired by Wang Shin-chen and Li P'an-lung's *kobunjigaku*:¹⁰

The study of ancient rhetoric does not merely consist of reading. It requires that a student produce ancient language with his own hand and fingers. Only when he is able to produce language with his own hand and fingers can ancient texts appear as if they were coming out of his mouth. Then it would be as though he were gathering to meet with ancient people even without self-introduction. ("Kutsu" 529)

Here the movement of one's "hand and fingers" is meant to coordinate with that of "mouth." That is, writing is seen as an extended form of speech. This passage clearly shows that Sorai comprehended the act of writing as a bodily performance modeled on a speech act. Intertextuality in the mode of *kobunjigaku* implies writing as a mimetic (re)production of the past enunciations recorded and inscribed in the ancient texts. If this is the case, Sorai's theory of "text viewing" should not be taken as contradicting his earlier reliance on speech. Sorai's *kobunjigaku* needs to be understood not as a departure, but as a development, from *Kiyo no gaku* at the level of writing.

In this way, the charge that Naoki Sakai does not take into consideration Sorai's later theory of text viewing turns out to be unfounded, revealing a rather limited understanding of his theoretical apparatus, including phonocentrism.

¹⁰ For the significance of *kobunjigaku* for Sorai and this letter in particular, see Yoshikawa 668-71. Sorai exchanged letters with Hori Keizan (also known as Kutsu Keisan), who later taught Motoori Norinaga in Kyoto. This is one example of Sorai's indirect influence on Norinaga.

Translation and the Schema of Cofiguration

Significantly, Sakai demonstrates that Sorai's Chinese learning is affected by a remarkable ambiguity. On the one hand, Sorai was strongly motivated not only to speak, but also to identify with Chinese in speech and writing. In this respect, he was possessed with the mimetic desire for Chinese as the other throughout his life. On the other hand, his efforts to eliminate the *kundoku* method brought about separation of two discrete linguistic spheres, that is, Chinese and Japanese. Therefore, his scholarship helped construct a sense of interiority, purifying a national language from the other. Sakai calls this dual process the "schema of cofiguration." Sakai fully formulates this notion in *Translation and Subjectivity* (1997), but one can easily see that his analysis of Sorai in *Voices of the Past* already dealt with the same mechanism. In this final section, let us explore its theoretical implications.

One might distinguish several different aspects or moments of this mechanism. First, the schema of cofiguration is a regime of translation that creates linguistic and cultural binary oppositions of mutually exclusive totalities, including not only Japanese and Chinese, but also Japan and the "West," the "West" and the "non-West." This mechanism implies that unity of a community is constructed by its distinction from and disidentification with another community. "Consequently," Sakai states, "the figure of one's own language as a systematic unity is a correlate in this schema of cofiguration to its twin partner, the figure of a foreign language" (*Translation* 59). Here we can see how Sakai develops the basic insight as to the mutual relationships between identity and difference in contemporary epistemology and cultural theory.

In the schema of cofiguration, Sorai believed that the hybrid system of *kanbun kundoku* must be eliminated as an anomaly. Commenting on Sakai's notion of cofiguration, Richard F. Calichman and John Namjun Kim make an important point about this mechanism in terms of otherness: "Alterity lies at the heart of relation, clearly enough, but the return from the world to the self takes place strictly by negating that alterity, neutralizing it in the process of interiorization" (4). As something eluding a binary opposition, alterity does not necessarily belong to the opposite side, but can and does lie within oneself. Eliminating alterity involves negating one's own life. This is precisely one of the effects of Sorai's attempt at separating two distinct language spheres. His linguistic methods, Sakai says, "both rejected the multilinguistic coexistence of languages, and were formed on the premises that hybrid languages such as the 'Japanese way of reading Chinese (*wakun*),' or the Japanese methods of annotating literary Chinese, be completely excluded" (*Translation* 66). Such exclusion of heterogeneity can lead to grave

consequences. Sakai continues,

At least in theory, the introduction of the schema of configuration prompted the possibility of negatively evaluating an individual belonging to many different linguistic communities and of moving around among them: the norm that the truly authentic language for an individual should be neither hybrid nor multiple was then inaugurated. (66)

The schema of configuration is thus a condition of possibility not only for a national language, but also for the move to eliminate diversity and heterogeneity within us. *Kanbun kundoku* would be an excellent example for such hybridity. However, Sorai's wish was never realized. The *kundoku* practice never disappeared in Japan but instead persisted after the Meiji period. It still remains as part of the school curriculum for Japanese language education. It would imply, for one thing, that *kundoku*, not to mention *kanji*, has been an ineradicable part of the linguistic traditions in Japan. *Kundoku* thus resists national configuration.

Second, translation implies that the act of drawing a boundary between one and the other constitutes the essence of their unities. It is not that independent persons, groups, languages, or cultures first exist and then enter into relationship with each other. Instead, difference and relationship between one and the other define their identities, and since the other is given in each historical context, one's identity is always open to the process of redefinition. One can hear an echo of what Derrida calls *différance* here. However, if translation is represented through the binary schema of configuration, this process will be concealed. Therefore, Sakai maintains that the practice of translation needs to be sharply distinguished from the "representation of translation" as communication and equivalence between two self-enclosed languages or communities.

Only in the representation of translation can we construct the process of translation as a transfer of some message from this side to that side, as a dialogue between one person and another, between one group and another, as if dialogue should necessarily take place according to the model of communication. . . . In this sense, the representation of translation transforms *difference in repetition* into *species difference* (diaphora) between two specific identities, and helps constitute the putative unities of national languages. . . . (15)

In this respect, it is undeniable that Sorai's understanding of translation derives

from the representation of translation. What Sorai aimed to do was to eliminate the incommensurate difference between Chinese and Japanese into particularities of neatly differentiated languages.

Third, Sakai presents his crucial insight that translation as the act of drawing a boundary does not itself belong to either side of this boundary. The act of translation itself that makes configuration possible precedes this binary opposition; translation cannot be classified into language, community, or region. Hence, the representation of translation as communication between two fixed entities is not just fundamentally different from the practice of translation as crossing the boundary; it implies nothing other than its reification. On the contrary, translation is an act of border-crossing. The translator between the addresser and the addressee cannot refer to herself in the first person “I.” Even beyond that, “the translator cannot be either the first or second or even third person undisruptively” (13). Thus, “the translator must speak in a forked tongue, and her enunciation must necessarily be one of mimicry” (12). Sakai calls this translator a “subject in transit.” As the translator’s position between the addresser and the addressee shows,

the truly authentic language has to be facilitated by the incessant oscillation between the inside and the outside of the scene of translation, the metaleptic stepping out and stepping in of the personal relation with the addresser and the addressee in the process of translation. (66-67)

This translational *metalepsis* makes it impossible for the translator to constitute her personal identity.¹¹ This is precisely what the “subject in transit” indicates. Interestingly enough, Sakai seems to suggest that hybridity of *kundoku* and the translator’s in-between positionality have much in common. If this is the case, *kanbun kundoku* might be described as a metaleptic form of reading/writing inscribed with return markers.

Self-Identification and the Other

In this way, Sakai analyzes how the schema of configuration misrepresents the very practice of translation, excluding alterity and hybridity inherent in the process. It also practically regulates our orientation of desire and worldview. In this respect, Sakai understands the schema of configuration not only as a linguistic and logical

¹¹ Gérard Genette explains the term “metalepsis” this way: “The transition from one narrative level to another can in principle be achieved only by narrating, the act that consists precisely of introducing into one situation, by means of a discourse, the knowledge of another situation” (234).

form of binary oppositions, but also in terms of psychoanalytic desire and transference in the constitution of the subject's cultural identity. In other words, self-identity of the subject is always mediated by its mimetic desire for an idealized other or ego ideal. Only through this ecstatic relation with the ideal image can the subject return to and identify itself as a particular subject. Obviously, for Ogyu Sorai, this ideal other as the frame of reference was the Chinese civilization, as embodied in the "Way of ancient kings" in particular. This ideal figuration of China incited his insatiable desire to transform his fellow Japanese and himself into "Chinese people." Sorai was not merely driven by this identificatory desire; he also tried to inspire it in the minds of the ruling and educated elite of the samurai class. At the same time, however, it is important to understand that Sorai was performatively inventing a national subject precisely by idealizing the ancient other. His methods of *Kiyo no gaku* and *kobunjigaku* both allowed him to circumscribe the self-identify of the Japanese language and people in contradistinction to the image of ancient China.¹² It is in all these senses that language learning formed the basis of his political philosophy.

Naoki Sakai detects critical overlaps between Sorai's political philosophy and that of political scientist Maruyama Masao. As is well known, in his influential study of the Tokugawa intellectual history, Maruyama argued that with his notion of the ancient kings, Ogyu Sorai created a modern political subjectivity of "invention" and decision-making for the first time in Japanese history (206-38).¹³ Using an analytical framework heavily informed by Western categories, Maruyama desired to identify potentials for modernity and modern subjectivity within the national history. In a sense, Maruyama sought to recover and repeat Sorai's political thought in a different historical and geopolitical context. Sakai identifies their structural parallels:

As if following "the predominance of the political factor" in Sorai's conception of the sages, Maruyama makes a political decision to admit to the West a status that corresponds to that of ancient China in Sorai's. And, as Sorai supposedly did with Tokugawa polity and China . . . , he has *politically and absolutely* decided to obtain the possibility to objectify and for him to suture Japan by postulating the universality of "the West" as "the non-Japanese position." (66)

¹² However, the Japanese language to be formed in contradistinction to the other was still lacking in the eighteenth century. *Kokugaku* or the national learning promoted by Motoori Norinaga and others would develop a notion of ancient Japanese language that had been lost and needed to be resurrected (Sakai, *Voices* 240-79).

¹³ It is necessary to note, however, that Maruyama did not pay much attention to the relevance of language in Sorai's methodology.

Of course, the desired other as the universal, “non-Japanese” frame of reference was different for each. For Sorai in the eighteenth century, it was ancient China, while Japan occupied a particular and peripheral position within this configuration. For Maruyama in the twentieth century, the civilizational other was of course the so-called “West.” The schema of configuration thus involves the historical dimension of changing intellectual and geopolitical hegemony.

What Sakai emphasizes, however, is the way both Sorai and Maruyama chose to finally identify with Japan through postulating the idealized universal other. That is to say, the other just seems to play the role of a symmetrical and commensurate other that enables self-referentiality. In this structure, the obsession with ancient China, or the West for that matter, guarantees and reinforces the adherence to Japan. After all, the other is used to construct one’s self-identity. Here there is no room for encounter with the incommensurable other. Nor is there any possibility for us to become other. Hybridity within us will be suppressed. Thus Sakai criticizes this complicit “narcissism” between Japan and China/the West, from which Sorai and Maruyama were not free.

In Lieu of Conclusion

Sakai’s schema of configuration critically problematizes the construction of the national language and identity, as well as the binary opposition between the “West” and the “non-West.” In this essay, I have discussed Sakai’s important concepts of translation and schema of configuration and how they developed out of his critical analysis of Ogyu Sorai’s linguistic and political philosophy. The schema of configuration is at work in the construction of a national language, a national boundary, and a national identity. One important implication of Sakai’s theory would be, above all, that the “West” only exists insofar as it distinguishes itself from its other, the “non-West.” It amounts to saying that the “West,” as such, does not exist. And now it is increasingly apparent that the Western-centric world order of modernity is coming to an end. In face of today’s rapidly changing international society across the globe and in East Asia, it may be worth rereading the Tokugawa intellectual history to imagine other possibilities as well as lessons for transnational and regional relations. The cultural heritage of *kanji* and *kanbun* might represent an important source for the ineffaceable hybridity within “Japan.”

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**Manuscript received 15 Sept. 2018,
accepted for publication 15 Nov. 2018