

Sai On's Autobiography as Didactic Rhetoric*

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The eighteenth century was a time of relative prosperity for Ryukyu, a small island kingdom existing literally and figuratively in a zone of tension created by overlapping Chinese and Japanese influence.¹ Sai On 蔡温 (1682-1761) was the kingdom's most influential politician and intellectual, and all indications are that he was the first Ryukyuan to write an explicitly autobiographical account. The original title of his autobiography was *Sai-uji Gushichan Ueekata Bunjaku anpun* 『蔡氏具志頭親方文若案文』 (*A Draft by Gushichan Ueekata Bunjaku of the Sai*

Lineage). Recognizing its autobiographical character, Iha Fyū 伊波普猷 (1876-1947) renamed the text *Sai On no jijoden*. Written in Japanese *sōrōbun*, the default written language of Ryukyuan officialdom, it was accessible to all officials and educated people throughout the kingdom. The majority of Ryukyuan at this time were illiterate and did not understand any form of Japanese. Therefore, Sai On wrote his autobiography for elites, broadly defined to include people such as local officials of minor rank and village leaders. His autobiography was a public document, in which Sai On presented his life as a model for emulation by these elites, and he carefully selected—or created—the events he narrated to stress several interconnected points.

Sai On wrote his autobiography after retiring from public life following a long, successful, but sometimes turbulent career at the highest levels of government.² His account is brief and asymmetrical. A mere ten percent of the work covers the period of Sai On's life from age thirty-nine through his full retirement from public affairs at age seventy-nine—the period of his greatest impact on Ryukyuan society. Nearly thirty percent of the autobiography is devoted to an encounter with a mysterious recluse in Fujian during his first trip to China at age twenty-eight. The encounter was the second of two *satori*-like

* N.B. An English translation of Sai On's autobiography is available at:

<http://www.east-asian-history.net/ryukyu/saion/jijoden/index.htm>.

The URL is case sensitive.

¹ The status of the early-modern Ryukyu kingdom is a complex topic. Simply stated, Ryukyu's tributary ties to China made the kingdom valuable to Satsuma and the Bakufu as conduit for goods and information. Therefore, although the Ryukyuan king was ostensibly a vassal of the daimyō of Satsuma, the kingdom enjoyed a large measure of autonomy owing to a concern by both Satsuma and the Bakufu to avoid potential complications with China. For a detailed discussion, see Gregory Smits, *Visions of Ryukyu: Identity and Ideology in Early-Modern Thought and Politics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), pp. 15-49.

The government of Ryukyu included some Japanese-derived institutions and some Chinese-derived institutions. Taken as a whole, however, the organization of the Ryukyuan state was substantially different from that of China, the Bakufu, or any Japanese domain government. For details see Matsuda, Mitsugu, *The Government of the Kingdom of Ryukyu, 1609-1872* (Naha, Japan: Yui Publishing Co., 2001).

² Sai On's career combined academics and politics. As a young man his reputation as a scholar enabled him to become a tutor to the crown prince. When the prince became king at a young age, Sai On became his advisor. In this capacity, Sai On managed a series of projects that included forestry surveys, hydraulic engineering endeavors, laying the groundwork for major ceremonies of state, and revising an official history of the kingdom. Activities such as these set the stage for Sai On to become a member of the Sanshikan (Council of Three), Ryukyu's highest organ of state, at age forty-seven. After this time he pursued a Confucian-inspired reform agenda with the king's backing, much of which was successful. After retirement, he wrote a series of essays, the study of which became de rigeur for subsequent generations of Ryukyuan elites.

awakenings that figure prominently in the autobiography, neither of which can be corroborated by any outside source. It is entirely possible that the most important portions of Sai On's autobiography are fictional in whole or in part.

Sai On's autobiography seems less peculiar when read in the context of his other writings. Indeed, each of his extant essays supplements and reinforces the others, much like chapters in a monograph. In particular, the *sōrōbun* essay *One Man's Views* (*Hitori monogatari*) complements the autobiography, discussing in detail Sai On's policies during the peak of his power, the very years conspicuously absent in his autobiography. Much of *One Man's Views* resembles a work like Arai Hakuseki's (1657-1725) autobiography, *Oritaku shiba no ki* 『折たく柴の記』 (*Told Round a Brushwood Fire*). Like Hakuseki, Sai On explained the rationale for his policies, emphasized their success, and sometimes indulged in saying "I told you so." As we will see, however, there were also significant differences between the autobiographical writings of these two men.

This essay analyzes Sai On's autobiography as a piece of public, didactic rhetoric. Through a close reading I show that the autobiography stressed precisely the points that most characterized Sai On's political agenda as expressed in his policies and other writings. The autobiography made these points in a manner which, for this serious and sober Confucian, likely represented his best attempt at dramatic writing. Indeed, Sai On's autobiography may have been his only work of fiction. After analyzing Sai On's autobiography, I briefly compare it with the autobiographies of Arai Hakuseki and Yamaga Sokō (1622-1685).

Making One's Destiny Through Effort

The autobiography starts with a lengthy account of an ongoing disagreement between Sai On's father, prominent scholar and diplomat Sai Taku 蔡鐸, and his mother Yōshi (葉氏, possibly "of the Yō lineage"). Although formally respectful of his father, Sai On clearly favored the views and deeds of his mother, portraying her as an example of someone in an ostensibly subordi-

nate or weak position who was able to change her family's situation owing to good sense, an iron will, and great effort. Yōshi's good sense took the form of a tendency to anticipate adverse circumstances and plan ahead to deal with them. Early in their marriage, the couple had a daughter but was childless for ten years thereafter. According to Sai On's account, Yōshi worried about the continuation of Sai Taku's lineage and urged him repeatedly to take a concubine in an attempt to produce a male heir. Her husband, however, was content with the status quo and planned to find an adopted son to marry their daughter. Yōshi eventually prevailed on Sai Taku to take in a concubine and made the necessary arrangements herself, promising the woman's parents that their daughter's offspring would suffer no loss of status within the Sai family.

The unnamed concubine did indeed bear a son, and, unexpectedly, so did Yōshi approximately two years later at age thirty-nine. Sai On was the younger son. It soon became apparent that Sai Taku intended to make his younger son the household heir because he was the offspring of his primary wife. He gave the young Sai On academic primers like the *Three Character Classic*, while giving his older brother books intended for clerical training. Yōshi, however, intervened, in part because of the promise she had made to the concubine's parents. But she also anticipated possible tragedy, explaining that one never knows what may happen in life and that should one of the sons die early, the other would be available to carry on the family lineage. Therefore, she argued, they should both receive the same classical education. Not only did she prevail on that point, but, apparently after lengthy arguments that became the talk of their community, she caused her husband to designate his older son as household heir.

Commenting on this situation, Sai On wrote "It was unheard of in the world for a wife to possess such a firm will, and it was remarkable that [Sai Taku] agreed to do things her way and to see how events might turn out in the future."³ It is

³ Sakihama Shūmei 崎浜秀明, *Sai On zenshū* 『蔡温全集』 (Honpō shoseki, 1984), p. 104. See pp. 103-4 for the full account.

interesting that in his various essays Sai On occasionally presented strong-willed, courageous women as exemplars. In *One Man's Views*, for example, he praised the wife of the lord of Komeji for taking it upon herself to attack and defeat a local brigand who sought to kill her apparently hapless husband.⁴ Such accounts resonate with many of the tales in Chinese collections biographies of exemplary women. In Sai On's writings, they serve as rhetorical devices to enhance the broader point that even the relatively weak—women in these cases—could change their circumstances for the better with righteous effort. Examples like Sai On's mother forcing her husband to bend to her will have an allegorical significance in the context of the relatively weak Ryukyu kingdom. If there is one point that Sai On stressed above all others it was that Ryukyuan can, should, and must take responsibility for their own destiny despite the structural disadvantages of being subordinate to both China and Japan.⁵

In his discussion of the disagreement between his parents, Sai On was explicit in portraying his father as an example of one who passively accepted what appeared to be his fate or destiny, when he should instead have been making an effort to change it for the better. Sai On, for example framed the issue of his father's taking a concubine in these terms:

Then because some ten years passed without Yōshi becoming pregnant, Sai Taku thought that they must surely resign themselves to the will of heaven [*tenmei* 天命].

Hereafter, *Sai On zenshū* appears as SOZ. Despite the title, this volume does not contain all of Sai On's extant essays, owing to discoveries after its publication. For an English translation of Sai On's autobiography, see: <http://www.east-asian-history.net/ryukyu/Saion/>.

⁴ Smits, *Visions*, p. 83.

⁵ Smits, *Visions*, pp. 86-99. In *One Man's Views*, Sai On describes nine gradations of countries, from wealthiest to poorest. He regarded Ryukyu as lowest on this scale, although at the same time he stressed that it could become stable and prosperous nevertheless.

But his wife remained steadfast in her view, and urged him repeatedly. Owing to his wife's uncanny steadfastness of purpose, my father finally agreed that to set his wife's heart at ease he would take a concubine.⁶

Although Sai On did accept that some things lie within the realm of unchangeable destiny, his emphasis was on what to him was the large realm in which effort could overcome adverse circumstances. Often, what might appear to be decreed or ordained by heaven was in fact alterable by steadfast effort.

Another aspect of Sai On's early life that he presented as an apparently innate shortcoming was what today we might call a learning disability. Unlike his studious older half brother Sai En, Sai On portrayed himself at age fifteen as "unable to remember a single line he had read. I eventually was able to remember a little by reading a half line at a time twenty or thirty times over. But I would forget even this meager attainment after three or four days had passed."⁷ At age sixteen, his lack of learning became such an embarrassment that he redoubled his efforts and enlisted the aid of several relatives as tutors. From this point on, he described steady and increasingly rapid upward progress in formal learning:

That year, I poured all my energy into reading, and I also received instruction in the meaning of what I read, one or two phrases at a time. From the ninth month of that year I became more at ease with study and the lessons in interpreting the meaning began covering a half page at a time. From the age of eighteen I could freely remember and interpret four or five pages, and from the age of nineteen I could read through books I had never before seen. From age twenty I had read through the greater part of the curriculum. At twenty one, I received the yellow cap [*hachimaki* 八卷] and became an in-

⁶ SOZ, p. 103.

⁷ SOZ, p. 104.

structor of reading. At twenty-five I became instructor of interpretation.⁸

Once again, effort and willpower transformed what appeared to be a serious, fated flaw into a personal strength.

Although the explicit emphasis in the autobiography is on overcoming and changing what might appear to be the decrees of destiny, there was also a more subtle use of a notion of fate or destiny that appears at several points. In each such instance, Sai On characterized an unexpected and beneficial encounter using the Buddhist term *en* 縁, a fated connection. The first encounter was Sai On's meeting a recluse in Fujian and becoming his student. He stated twice that this meeting was occasioned by destiny and entirely unanticipated.⁹ Later during that same stay in Fujian, Sai On unexpectedly discovered a temple near the Ryukyuan Affairs Office (*Ryūkyū kariya*, 琉球仮屋) that possessed a complete collection of the major Sutras and books about conditions in India, all of which he was able to read.¹⁰ Finally, on the way to Beijing during his second trip to China, Sai On encountered a Buddhist priest from India who spoke Chinese. They were able to talk at length as they traveled through the river and canal system on the same boat.¹¹

These three fated connections might have suggested to a reader that Sai On was destined for greatness, a message at some odds with the extensive discussion of the adversities of his youth. The more likely function of discussing the fated connections from Sai On's point of view would have been to establish firmly his credentials as an expert on Buddhism. Sai On's political agenda and the arguments he put forth in support of it relied heavily on discussions of Buddhism, which comprised the intellectual framework of many of his most vigorous opponents, especially the writer Heshikiya Chōbin 平敷屋朝敏 (1700-1734). On the one hand, Sai On sought to undermine the validity of Buddhism, yet on the

other he regarded himself as a Ryukyuan version of Shakyamuni. I have discussed Sai On's relationship with Buddhism at length elsewhere, and the point here is simply to explain the structural function of the three "fated encounters" in the autobiography.¹² Furthermore, in the course of describing the details of each encounter, Sai On clearly stated that they furthered his knowledge of the nature of Buddhism and its relationship with Confucianism.

The details of most of the matters discussed thus far cannot be verified by any outside source. Critical readers might take with a grain of salt, for example, the vigor with which Yōshi urged her reluctant husband to take a concubine or the apparent passivity of Sai Taku, a veteran diplomat and eventual head of Kumemura 久米村, Ryukyu's community of China specialists. It may strain credulity to think that someone previously incapable of mastering formal book learning could so quickly rise to the level of instructor of interpretation. Furthermore, given the relatively brief time Sai On was in China, it is hard to imagine that he mastered the major texts of Buddhism there, while also attending to his ordinary duties at the Ryukyuan Affairs Office. It is probably best to regard these and similar accounts as at least partly fictionalized allegorical tales presented as inspirational rhetoric by a man in his seventies concerned about shaping his legacy to maximum effect.

Twice Awakened

Central to Sai On's autobiography are two accounts of experiences that awakened him to deficiencies in his knowledge and inspired him to

⁸ SOZ, p. 105.

⁹ SOZ, p. 108.

¹⁰ SOZ, p. 108.

¹¹ SOZ, p. 109.

¹² Regarding Sai On's views on Buddhism and Shakyamuni, see Gregory Smits, "The Intersection of Politics and Thought in Ryukyuan Confucianism: Sai On's Uses of *Quan*," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 56, no. 2 (December 1996): 433-477; and "Sai On no gakutō to shisō: toku ni bukkyō/Shaka ron o chūshin to shite" 「蔡温の学統と思想：特に仏教・釈迦論を中心として」, *Okinawa bunka kenkyū* 『沖縄文化研究』, no. 23 (March 1997): 1-38.

overcome those deficiencies. To understand his first awakening, we need some knowledge of the peculiar Ryukyuan community of Kumemura, today a part of Naha. All the households of Kumemura enjoyed elite status during the eighteenth century. They received government stipends in return for taking Chinese surnames and mastering aspects of Chinese language and ritual forms to serve the state as interpreters, trade officials, and diplomats. By the late seventeenth century, Kumemura had become a virtual, not an actual, Chinese Diaspora community. Although it originated as land given to Fujianese immigrants to Ryukyu early in the Ming dynasty, by Sai On's time, most of Kumemura's population consisted of Ryukyuan without any direct connection to China in their family lineages. They settled in Kumemura with state encouragement because of their ability to master Chinese culture, ideally to the point where they could function as quasi-Chinese. Although he does not mention this point in the autobiography, both of Sai On's parents were first generation "immigrants" to Kumemura from elsewhere in Okinawa. The concentration of talent in Kumemura resulting from this situation was one reason for that community's dominance in Ryukyuan politics during the eighteenth century. The main point to bear in mind with respect to Sai On's first awakening was that Kumemura was a community in which ability, especially academic ability, mattered more than the status of one's ancestors.

When he was sixteen, Sai On gathered with other teenagers and young men outside the main gate of Kumemura to enjoy a spectacular moonlit night. For reasons not stated, Sai On got into an argument with Kobashigawa Niya, the son of a family that had recently purchased aristocratic status and moved to Kumemura. Kobashigawa told Sai On that he should go home immediately because he was not really of aristocratic status and thus did not belong in the group. Sai On, offspring of perhaps the most prominent family in Kumemura, was flabbergasted to be told such a thing by someone of Kobashigawa's background. Kobashigawa explained that he and the others in the group were all making excellent progress in scholarship and were thus true aristocrats. You, he said to Sai On, merely wear the clothes of an aristocrat because of your family's

high status, but you have none of the requisite substance:

Even though you have forgotten the *Greater Learning* and the *Mean*, because you are the child of a man of *ueekata* 親方 status, you wear splendid clothes. But in reality, you are no different from the son of a peasant. We have all made good progress in reading and have received the praise of our teachers. But what praise have you received? Saying this, he clapped his hands and laughed, and the others joined him.¹³

This shocking encounter was the culmination of a period of personal torpor resulting from the designation of Sai On's half brother as household heir. One obvious rhetorical function of this part of the autobiography is to devalue accidents of birth in favor of actual accomplishments and ability.

The distinction between outward appearances and true substance is the underlying theme in both of Sai On's awakening experiences. Owing to the encounter with Kobashigawa, the shocked Sai On brooded over his situation and then set his mind firmly on mastering book learning. We have already seen his description of advancing from a semi-literate ignoramus to a teacher of interpretation of the classics over an approximately eight year span. This rapid advancement set the stage for the second awakening, which Sai On portrayed as the pivotal event of his life and which comprises the lengthiest discussion in his autobiography.

During his first trip to China at age twenty-eight, Sai On served as a minor functionary who remained behind at the Ryukyuan Affairs Office in Fujian while most of the other members of a tribute mission traveled to Beijing. According to his account, he began visiting the nearby Lingyun 凌雲 Temple and befriended the head priest. One day the head priest mentioned to Sai On that a man from "Huguang" 湖広, a term indicating Hubei and Hunan Provinces, was visiting the temple and could be found in its library.

¹³ SOZ, p. 105.

The priest presented this information to Sai On in a manner calculated to pique his curiosity, portraying the visitor as an enigma and challenging Sai On to help figure him out. During the first visit, the man gave no indication of any special qualities, asking Sai On some simple questions about Ryukyu. Sai On's inclination was not to waste any more time talking with this visitor, but the head priest urged Sai On to come back the next day, and he did so mainly out of deference to the priest.

During the next visit, the visitor asked Sai On about whether his kingdom valued the Confucian classics, and Sai On explained that he was well versed in the classics as were most of his colleagues. The day ended with the head priest saying to Sai On that the visitor resembled one of the sagely recluses of old (*inja* 隱者). Sai On was not impressed, however, characterizing the temple visitor as resembling "the sort of teachers we bring in to assist at the Ryukyuan Affairs Office."¹⁴ Again, in deference to the head priest's insistent request, Sai On agreed to return the next day. During that visit, the man asked Sai On to compose a poem about the scenery surrounding the temple. Sai On dashed off a poem, which the visitor praised lavishly, reading it several times aloud before hanging it on the wall. Sai On surely knew that his poem was no great work of art, and he concluded that the visitor "must not be very good at composition."¹⁵ Again, the same cycle ensued whereby Sai On did not want any further contact with the man, but the head priest eventually persuaded Sai On to come back for one last visit.

The first three encounters were apparently part of an elaborate setup calculated to magnify the psychological impact of the fourth visit. The man who had appeared so easily amused by Sai On's poem the day before turned to him and accused him of having wasted his life and of learning nothing of value during his twenty-eight years of existence. Partially echoing Kobashigawa's earlier accusation, the recluse characterized Sai On as possessing only the superficial, outward forms

of learning, what the autobiography calls "the dregs of words" (*moji no kasu* 文字之糟粕). There was some difference between the two critiques. Kobashigawa likened the teenage Sai On to a farmer's son, presumably someone lacking formal education and the sophistication associated with it. The recluse implicitly acknowledged Sai On's accomplishments, but described them as the work of an artisan or craftsman (*saiku* 細工), beautiful and detailed, perhaps, but serving no purpose other than aesthetic pleasure. He accused Sai On of indulging in the dregs of words merely for his personal amusement, saying that because he lacked knowledge of true learning, Sai On was of no use to himself or his country. Kobashigawa had been the catalyst for Sai On to open the books, and the recluse became the catalyst for Sai On to apply the knowledge contained therein to practical problems as opposed to aesthetic pursuits.

Also as in the encounter with Kobashigawa, Sai On protested that the recluse's accusation was unreasonable, pointing out he had "read through" all of the classics and even composed an impromptu poem the day before. To prove his point, the recluse opened a copy of the *Analects*, which the autobiography points out served as an elementary reading text for young students at the temple. He pointed to the term *jingshi* 敬事, which has little self-evident meaning and might be translated out of context as "respectful service." A conversation ensued in which Sai On repeatedly glossed the term with other, equally vague expressions such as "loving people" and "carrying out the correct path."¹⁶ In response to each gloss the recluse asked Sai On what specific steps a ruler or government official might take to put that nice sentiment into practice. Unable to answer any of these inquiries, Sai On awakened to the truth of the recluse's accusation: his learning to date was indeed of no practical use.

In the course of his critique, the recluse referred to the steps of the *Greater Learning*:

The Four Books and the Six Classics as well as other wise writings are all tools for [what the *Greater Learning* calls]

¹⁴ SOZ, p. 106. The entire discussion of the encounter and its effects spans pp. 105-108.

¹⁵ SOZ, p. 106.

¹⁶ SOZ, p. 107.

making the will sincere [*sei'i*, 誠意] and governing the realm [*chikoku*, 治國]. But you have forgotten the great utility [*taiyō*, 大用] of making the will sincere and governing the realm. You “work” at things like reading and composition simply for amusement. In the end, you have forgotten yourself and your country, which is actually worse than being a craftsman.¹⁷

In *One Man's Views* and in his philosophical essays, Sai On frequently made the point that academic learning has no legitimate function other than aiding government. Of course it might also assist in personal development, but, as the *Greater Learning* points out, personal development is the basis for governing one's household and then governing the state, with peace throughout the realm as the final product. Elsewhere, Sai On wrote extensively about managing household finances, agricultural techniques, and other specific measures for enhancing the material basis of society. The corpus of his written work and the “text” of his policy agenda and activities in government all fit Sai On's interpretation of the *Greater Learning* as authorizing concrete, practical knowledge as the true goal of learning. The unnamed recluse, with whom Sai On said he studied for five months, functioned, for all intents and purposes, as his alter ego in the autobiography.

It may seem unexceptional that Confucian scholars would make good government the goal of learning, and indeed they usually did so rhetorically.¹⁸ Sai On's point was that actions speak

louder than words. Parroting what the classics say about government is no substitute for things like knowing the soil and wind conditions of one's territories, conducting surveys of conditions in remote villages and forests, and using such knowledge to instruct the subjects of a state in more efficient production methods—all activities that Sai On did prior to and after joining Ryukyu's highest governing body, the Sanshikan 三司官 (Council of Three). It was rare in East Asia, to find Confucian scholars and high government officials writing about such topics as, for example, the importance of mixing urine into batches of fertilizer.¹⁹ For Sai On, the proper

On no *gakutō*.” Sai On himself consistently spoke at the level of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, making no further distinctions. The broader intellectual environment of eighteenth century Ryukyu tended toward the pragmatic use of a variety of Chinese technologies, both in the sense of things like machinery for refining sugar or techniques for smallpox inoculations and in the form of geomancy and popular Daoism. Clarification of the disputed fine points of Confucian doctrine seems to have been of no use or interest to Ryukyuan elites. Kate Wildman Nakai's characterization of Arai Hakuseki as “a Confucian ‘actor’ rather than a Confucian ‘thinker’” would apply nicely to Sai On as well. See *Shogunal Politics: Arai Hakuseki and the Premises of Tokugawa Rule* (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1988), p. 79.

¹⁹ The discussion of urine as fertilizer is found in *Heiji kanai monogatari* 『平時家内物語』, a manual for framing households in Gushichan Magiri: “As for the extensive use of fertilizer on areas of poor soil, there are specific agricultural guidelines. Fertilizer is particularly effective when mixed with urine, but in this place, though several varieties of fertilizer are used, urine is not collected in very high quantities. It is for this reason that the use of fertilizer is often ill-informed and ineffective.” SOZ, p. 12. Regarding Sai On's forest surveys and the system of forest management he developed, see Smits, *Visions*, pp. 103-110. For an English translation of *Heiji kanai monogatari*,

¹⁷ SOZ, p. 107.

¹⁸ Regarding Confucianism in Ryukyu, neither Sai On, Tei Junsoku, nor any other Ryukyuan Confucian made explicit distinctions between different schools of Confucianism, such as Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, the school of Wang Yangming, Ancient Learning, and so forth. Sai On seems to have been well read in both Chinese and Japanese Confucian literature, but attempts to locate him in a particular partisan Confucian school have been problematic. For a detailed discussion of this matter see Smits, “Sai

goal of learning was to promote results like increased sweet potato yields through better fertilizer mixes or a coastal transportation network, which enabled farmers more efficiently to bring their products to market. Sai On's stress on utility and his specific critique of aesthetic-oriented learning was also a critique of his opponents in Ryukyuan politics.

One set of opponents, albeit one whose voice is muted in official records, consisted of some members of Kumemura, best represented by Tei Junsoku 程順則 (1663-1734). He was a diplomat and scholar of Chinese culture, particularly poetry and other aspects of aesthetic refinement. Such knowledge probably served Tei Junsoku well during his many official trips to China, but as we will see, Sai On portrayed him as utterly ineffective in the context of describing the Valuation Incident.²⁰ Another set of opponents of Sai On's policies were a group of playwrights, poets, and novelists influenced by Buddhism and classical Japanese courtly aesthetics. Heshikiya Chōbin was the leading figure of this group, and he and fourteen of his associates were executed in 1734 after an unsuccessful attempt to undermine Sai On via an appeal to Satsuma. Heshikiya's aesthetics and his opposition to Sai On's attempts to transform Ryukyuan society into a somber, efficient machine continued to appeal to some members of Ryukyu's elite even after Heshikiya's downfall. In short, Sai On's antagonism toward both Buddhist and Confucian aesthetics was closely connected with his political agenda and battles. Locating the authority for such an agenda in the figure of a mysterious, sagely recluse in Fujian was a rhetorical strategy designed to provide that agenda with a greater aura of legitimacy.

In characterizing his encounter with the recluse and the distinction between verbal dregs versus true learning that it engendered, Sai On said that

“it was like waking from a dream.” This expression comprises part of the title of one of his philosophical essays, *Essential Views Upon Awakening* 『醒夢要伝』 (*Xingmeng yaolun*). The essay features a detailed discussion of the workings of fate and destiny, the message of which is that we can control most aspects of what appears to be our destiny, but doing so requires great effort applied over a long period of time, perhaps even over several generations (thus benefiting a household's fortunes more so than those of an individual).²¹ As he portrayed it, Sai On's encounter awakened him to the possibility of altering Ryukyu's destiny, and the path to doing so consisted of pragmatic knowledge that would increase the wealth and stability of society. Aesthetic pursuits were at best a distraction and at worst a clear hindrance to that goal.

The Valuation Incident

The last major topic in the autobiography is a detailed description of the so-called Valuation Incident (*Hangaa jiken* 評価事件), which took place in 1719 in connection with the investiture ceremonies for the new king, Shō Kei 尚敬 (r. 1713-1751). Ryukyuan kings sought formal investiture from the Chinese emperor, which enhanced their prestige but was very expensive. Shō Kei's investiture was delayed several years to allow the royal government to scrape together funds, and it resulted in additional ad hoc tax levies, one of which lasted until 1728.²² Typically, several hundred Chinese would arrive in Naha for the investiture ceremonies, where they remained for several months. Most were merchants whose goods the royal government purchased in a formal valuation process by which officials in Kumemura inspected the items and

see http://www.east-asian-history.net/ryukyu/saion/heiji_kanai/index.htm.

²⁰ Regarding Tei Junsoku, see Smits, *Visions*, pp. 62-70. Regarding muted evidence of a serious struggle between Sai On and at least some subset of Kumemura's China experts, see pp. 128-132.

²¹ For a discussion of *Essential Views Upon Awakening* in the context of Sai On's discussion of destiny, see Smits, *Visions*, pp. 91-94.

²² Smits, *Visions*, p. 77. Regarding the Valuation Incident, see pp. 77-78 and SOZ, pp. 110-111. In most reference books, the incident is known by the Okinawan pronunciation of “value,” *hangaa*, not the Japanese *hyōka*.

came to an agreement on prices for each type of goods.

During Shō Kei's investiture, the valuation process got off to a bad start when the Ryukyuan side announced that its government had 500 *kanme* of silver for the purchase of goods, and the Chinese merchants claimed to have brought goods with a total value of 2000 *kanme* of silver. Naturally, they were dismayed at the prospect of returning with so many unsold goods, even if they exaggerated by using the 2,000 *kanme* figure. According to the autobiography, the Chinese merchants claimed that even the poorest of kingdoms should be able to purchase 6,000 or 7,000 *kanme* of goods, and the investiture envoys backed the merchants in expressing discontent. The situation grew tense and the Ryukyuan valuation officials, led by Tei Junsoku, asked Sai On to intervene.

Sai On stepped in to mediate between the top levels of the Ryukyuan government and the Chinese merchants. He portrayed the essential problem as poor communication exacerbated by a lack of courage on the part of the valuation officials. The poor communication was the result of Ryukyuan difficulties with spoken Chinese. Sai On therefore pressed for all communication to be conducted in writing. Apparently, however, he was not able to keep a lid on unauthorized verbal communication. Rumors spread, and the Chinese merchants eventually seized Sai On and held him hostage. According to his self-aggrandized account, Sai On betrayed no sign of fear and was eventually able to convince the merchants that the royal government indeed possessed no more than 500 *kanme*. The merchants agreed to begin the valuation process based on this amount the next day.

In the meantime, Tei Junsoku and the other valuation officials had fled to a nearby temple in fear. Despite direct orders from the Sanshikan to come out and start the valuation process, they refused to do so until Sai On promised to be present as well. Sai On assisted with the valuation process for five days and then let the normal officials handle the remaining negotiations. In the end, the chief investiture envoy, seeing the vast quantities of unsold goods, petitioned the Ryukyuan government to figure out some way to raise more money. Sai On's idea was to collect

jewelry and the large hairpins worn by the Ryukyuan nobility from all households in the urban areas around Naha. After melting them down into coins, the Ryukyuan government was able to purchase and additional 100 *kanme* of goods.

One obvious reason for Sai On essentially to end his autobiography with this incident (the rest of his life, age thirty-nine through seventy-five, flies by in less space than the description of the valuation incident) was to highlight his courage and indispensability, especially in contrast with the hapless Tei Junsoku. It also served to validate many of the points discussed above. Despite Ryukyu's poverty, for example, it could still participate fully in the Chinese world order, its king receiving robes, a crown, a seal, and other accouterments from the Chinese emperor. Turning the near disaster of the Valuation Incident into a success was an example of taking control of one's destiny. Furthermore, whatever the exact components of Sai On's "true" learning may have been, the Valuation Incident showed them clearly to have been superior to Tei Junsoku's aesthetic-oriented Confucianism. In Sai On's account of the Valuation Incident, one can almost hear the recluse in Fujian berating Tei Junsoku for having forgotten the true meaning of learning.

There are some outside sources to corroborate the Valuation Incident, although it is still impossible to verify many details. Certainly Sai On's description of it as largely a breakdown in communications and courage seems overly simplistic. Whatever may actually have happened, the incident served as an excellent rhetorical capstone to the points made throughout the autobiography. Sai On's autobiography is a well-crafted text, which, although not reliable as a factual account, is an excellent allegorical summary of the agenda to which he devoted his life.

Conclusions

As a Confucian scholar who was influential in government, Sai On's autobiography might be comparable to Yamaga Sokō's *Haisho zanpitsu* 『配所殘筆』 (*Writings in Exile*) or Arai Hakuseki's autobiography, works Sai On might have read. Matsudaira Sadanobu's (1758-1829) *Uge no hitokoto* 『宇下人言』 would also be

an example of an autobiography of an influential, Confucian-oriented official, albeit one written well after Sai On's time. Autobiographical writings, typically taking the form of instructions to later generations of a household, were common among Chinese literati. It is possible, therefore, that any number of Chinese or Japanese autobiographical writings could have inspired Sai On's autobiography, although it also possible that the idea was largely his own. Even if autobiographies like those of Sokō or Hakuseki did influence Sai On, his work differs from theirs in many respects. In conclusion, I will comment briefly on Sai On's autobiography in a comparative context.

Yamaga Sokō's relatively short autobiography changes tone about half way through the work. The first half is a rather dry chronicle of Sokō's encounters with teachers, scholars, and students, describing in detail his progress in mastering the Chinese classics, classical Japanese literature and poetic forms, and military literature. Interestingly, the very early material contains a passage reminiscent of Sai On's claim of being initially unable to learn. According to Sokō: "When I was six I was ordered by my parents to devote myself to learning. I was inept, though, and it was only when I was eight that I could more or less read the Nine Chinese Classics, the Seven Books on Military Strategy, and the Books on Poetry."²³ The tone of the work becomes more vivid and intense, however, as Sokō's 1666 exile to Akō approaches. The apparent reason for this exile was that his book *Seikyō yōroku* 『聖教要録』 (Essential record of the sages' teachings) offended one or more Bakufu officials. The relevant section begins with a letter from his lord demanding Sokō's presence. It describes in detail Sokō's last-minute preparations for what he thought might be a death sentence and describes

the journey to Akō. Especially interesting is a letter Sokō included in the autobiography, addressed to his lord, Hōjō Yasufusa. In the letter, Sokō characterizes himself as merely having attempted to clarify the way of the sages and as having fallen victim to the slander of today's degenerate scholars. It is defiant in tone. Sokō explained that he wrote the letter to be his last statement had he been sentenced to death, but that he withheld it when it became clear that he would be exiled instead. After this point, Sokō's autobiography goes into detail on his interpretation of history and his intellectual views.²⁴ Saeki Shoichi points out that the tediousness of the first part of Sokō's autobiography may have been intentional, a device to accentuate the significance of his exile. For Sokō, "The day of his exile had assumed for him the greatest moral significance, and in building up his narrative to that moment, he had realized amply the potential for self-dramatization in the genre."²⁵

As we have seen, Sai On's autobiography likewise, took moments of great moral significance and dramatized them. Indeed, such moments comprise the bulk of the entire work. Furthermore, with the exception of the Valuation Incident, in Sai On's case we cannot be certain that anything he described even took place. This lack of verifiability is also present in the early part of Arai Hakuseki's biography. As Robert L. Backus points out, Hakuseki presented his youthful self as the ideal mixture of scholar and warrior, but "How closely he really approached this difficult synthesis is anybody's guess."²⁶

The autobiographies of both Sokō and Hakuseki, although written in part to justify their views and deeds, inevitably expressed their authors' disappointment at failing to meet many of their goals. Sokō wrote his autobiography during what proved to be the final year of a nine-year

²³ Quoted in Saeki Shoichi, "The Autobiography in Japan," Teruko Craig, trans., *Journal of Japanese Studies* 11, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 363. For the original passage, see Tahara Tsuguo 田原嗣郎 and Morimoto Junnichirō 守本順一郎, eds., *Yamaga Sokō* 『山鹿素行』, *Nihon shisō taikai* 32 (Iwanami Shoten, 1970), p. 318.

²⁴ See especially, Tahara and Morimoto, *Yamaga Sokō*, pp. 328-338.

²⁵ Saeki, "Autobiography," p. 364.

²⁶ Robert L. Backus, Review of Joyce Ackroyd, *Told Round a Brushwood Fire: The Autobiography of Arai Hakuseki*, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 41, no. 1 (Jun., 1981): 241.

exile, though he did not know of the impending pardon while he was writing. Hakuseki was under virtual house arrest at the time he wrote, the administration of Tokugawa Yoshimune (r. 1716-1745) having reversed or abolished nearly all of the policies Hakuseki advocated as an advisor to the two previous shōguns, Ienobu and Ietsugu. By contrast, Sai On's autobiography is a self-assured success story, ending with the sentence "Thus I finish my account with sincere gratitude and in comfortable retirement."²⁷ Sai On had his enemies, and to some extent they staged a political comeback in the decades after his death. Nevertheless, he seemed well aware of his stature and influence in the history of Ryukyu, and his autobiography reflects that confidence. Hakuseki, by contrast was so determined "to vindicate every detail and aspect of his administrative policies that he unwittingly destroys the structural balance of the book" according to Saeki.²⁸

Sai On's autobiography ends on a note of contentment, and is not addressed to anyone in particular, not even his posterity. In ending *One Man's Views*, however, Sai On explicitly said that he hoped his essay would be of assistance to Okinawa's urban aristocracy as well as minor officials on every island in the Ryukyu kingdom in their pursuit of the way of government.²⁹ Clearly Sai On wrote his autobiography as an attempt to inspire Ryukyuan to greatness at a personal level. *One Man's Views* complements the autobiography as a catalogue of specific policies Sai On advocated and as a broader explanation of Ryukyu's relationship with Satsuma, one that placed responsibility for Ryukyu's destiny in the hands of Ryukyuan. Unlike the autobiographies of Hakuseki and Sokō, there is no dropping of the names of famous scholars or highly-placed politicians in Sai On's work. The effect, of course, is to spotlight himself even more intensely.

Even the mysterious hermit goes unnamed, despite Sai On's claiming to have asked his name on the day the recluse left Fujian. Whereas Hakuseki and Sokō wrote their life stories in substantial part to assuage the pain of failure, Sai On wrote an allegorical tale of his early life to capitalize on his successes.

²⁷ SOZ, p. 112.

²⁸ Saeki, "Autobiography," p. 362.

²⁹ SOZ, p. 89.