

# The Reception and Dissemination of the *Analects* in Ancient Japan

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## **Abstract:**

The *Analects* has been highly valued and influenced all aspects of Japanese politics, ideology and culture since it was introduced to Japan. The dissemination of the *Analects* varied rather widely under different historical contexts. This study aims to investigate the reception of the *Analects* and its commentaries at different development stages in ancient Japan, and to analyze the changes of the way *Analects* was studied, the reception purposes and the dissemination class in different periods of ancient Japan, thereby outlining the development contrail of the *Analects* in Japan and providing a glimpse of its role in cultural exchange between China and Japan.

**Keywords:** *Analects*; Ancient Japan; dissemination; reception

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Of all the Chinese classics that were spread in ancient Japan, the *Analects* was undoubtedly the first Confucian classic to be introduced. In a strict sense, the reception of the *Analects* in ancient Japan was a joint reception of the original scripts of the *Analects* and its commentaries. In terms of both the accuracy and the systematic nature of the historical record, the *Analects* has provided a record of Confucius and the original Confucian thought that is unmatched by any other Confucian classic. Over the thousand years of its eastern dissemination to Japan, the *Analects* has presented quite different characteristics regarding its dissemination under different historical and cultural contexts.

## II. THE DISSEMINATION CONTRAIL OF THE ANALECTS IN ANCIENT JAPAN

### 2.1 Early introduction of the *Analects* to Japan

In ancient Japan, the development of social economy and culture was extremely poor, and the desire for Chinese culture was as desperate as the aspiration for rains in a long drought. As recorded in the *History of Baekje*, the *Analects* were early sent as tribute to Japan from ancient Korea. In 285 AD, "Boshi (court academician, official title in feudal China) presented Japan the *Analects* and the *Thousand Character Classic*". The *Kojiki-Volume II* as recorded as follows, "should there be a wise man in Baekje, offer him up as tribute. The person whose name, offered by the command, was Wani-Kishi. And, the King gave, as tributes, along with him, ten volumes of the *Analects* and one volume of the *Thousand Character*

Classic (This Wani-Kishi is the progenitor of the Fumino Obito clan.)”.<sup>[1]</sup> However, the Japanese historians are cautious and generally consider the records to be less credible as there are no relevant physical remains or documentation. The time of historical record also varies from 285 AD, to the 16th year of Ojin and 405 AD, hence, we can only determine that the *Analects* was one of the first ancient Chinese classic to be disseminated to Japan based on Japanese historical records, while the exact time remains uncertain. According to the *Nihon Shoki*, the official history of Japan, during the reign of the Empress of Suiko, Prince Shōtoku authored the Seventeen-Article Constitution, of which the terms “harmony is most prized virtue” and “employ people at proper seasons” were all derived from the *Analects*·*Xue Er*, hence it can be inferred that the thought of the *Analects* was already reflected in Japanese political ideology in the first half of the 7th century AD. Furthermore, based on the bamboo slips excavated at the former site of Fujiwara Palace, it can be inferred that the *Thousand Character Classic* and the *Analects* were already used in the Fujiwara-kyō period as common reading materials and practice models for the Japanese intellectual class.

It is commonly accepted in Japanese academia that the period from the arrival of the Baekjean Wang Ren to the end of the 6th century was the period of the Koreanization of Chinese classics in Japan, when the classics of Chinese Confucianism were introduced to Japan from the Korean peninsula, and the initial period of the introduction is known as the “Early Confucianism”. As the earliest Chinese classic to be introduced to Japan, although the exact date of the introduction of the *Analects* is not known, it must have been no later than the second half of the 5th century AD.

## 2.2 Interpretation of ancient commentaries

The reception of the ancient commentaries of the *Analects* has been elucidated in the Study of the Holy Bible in Ancient Japan (From the Early Heian Period), a book of the Japanese scholar Kumaichiro Uchino. Although the edition types remain uncertain, it is well recognized that the Commentaries of Zheng Xuan, Commentary Collection of He Yan, etc. were the first commentaries to be introduced, and later a variety of commentaries were disseminated. Collected Commentary on the *Analects* by He Yan, Commentary on the *Analects* by Huang Kan, and Commentary on the *Analects* by Zheng Xuan were the more influential commentaries. Of these, Collected Commentary on the *Analects* by He Yan and Commentary on the *Analects* by Huang Kan were widely circulated at almost the same time, and both were highly influential in the history of the study of *Analects* in ancient Japan. These commentaries were referred to as “ancient commentaries” by Japanese scholars and were disseminated in Japanese society before the Edo period.

In 607 AD, Japan started to send Japanese Missions to Tang China and Sui China to study and learn from China, and since then Japanese Sinology had entered the period of Chineseization, creating a new situation for the eastern spread of Chinese Confucianism. After the 9th century, when Japan entered the Heian period, the study and recitation of the *Analects* grew in popularity. At that time, the Japanese court established the post of “Doctor of Confucian Classics”, who was responsible for teaching the Confucian classics, and by the end of the 10th century this post had developed into a permanent hereditary position for both the Kiyohara and Nakahara families. In the Zhenguan Era of the Tang Dynasty, the Emperor

Seiwa himself set up a pulpit to teach the *Analects*, which was called “the Round Pearl Sutra” at the time. This description can be traced back to Commentary on the *Analects* by Huang Kan, the preface to which states that “The *Analects* is as witty and beautiful as the Pearl”.<sup>[2]</sup> The dissemination and study of the *Analects* in Japan at this time had not changed fundamentally in its lineage, apart from the emergence of various forms and means of dissemination. Although this way of preserving the tradition of the classics through the secret heritage of the family is conducive to the passing on of the ancient commentaries on the *Analects*, it suffers from the disadvantage of being old-fashioned and obstructing the free development of scholarship on the *Analects*.

When it was introduced to Japan, the ancient commentaries on the *Analects* were confined to monks and other high-ranking intellectuals, as well as scholars from the upper classes of public officials and aristocrats, and their dissemination was rather limited, and their reception was still limited to the level of reading and understanding, not to mention scholarly research.

### 2.3 Popularity of the new commentaries

The Commentary of Zhu Xi, also known as the New Commentary, is a commentary on the *Analects* by Zhu Xi, a famous philosopher of the Southern Song Dynasty. In contrast to the ancient commentaries of the Han and Wei dynasties, which mainly focused on the exegesis of names and characteristics of objects, the most important feature of Zhu's commentary was its emphasis on the exposition of moral axioms. In the first half of the 13th century, there was a growing trend towards the fusion of Confucianism and Buddhism, followed by the emergence of such famous Confucian monks as Gene, Lanxi Daolong, Kokan Shiren, Sesson Yūbai and Gidō Shūshin, who studied Confucianism of Song dynasty. By the time of the Song and Yuan dynasties, the monks who had gone to Japan and the Japanese monks who had entered China promoted Zen Buddhism in Japan, and Confucianism became more and more widespread in connection with Zen Buddhism, leading the Confucian monks to deepen their understanding of Confucianism of Song dynasty, even to the extent that Fujiwara Seika and Yamazaki Ansai abandoned Buddhism for Confucianism. In particular, Fujiwara Seika was a Zen monk who owed profound learning on “Five Mountain System”, and broke away from Buddhism and devoted himself to studying Zhu Xi's collected commentaries on Confucianism and imposing exhortation points for them. Since then Japanese Confucianism has emerged from a situation of subordination to Zen Buddhism and has begun to develop independently. In the 14th and 15th centuries, there was a surge in the preaching of Song Confucianism in Japan, which was studied and exegeted as a separate ideological doctrine. Gene initiated the first lecture on the interpretation of Cheng–Zhu school, from which the new commentary flourished. And after the introduction of the new commentaries to Japan, the exegesis of Chinese classics continued to develop. For a long time before that, Japanese people could only learn Chinese classics by reading them phonetically, and the dissemination of the *Analects* was confined to scholars with a high level of Chinese cultural training. The advent of the *Four Books* and the Sign and Kunyomi, as well as commentaries using Japanese hiragana and katakana, made the original texts accessible to those who did not know Chinese, thus facilitating the spread and popularity of Zhu's commentary in Japan.

During the Edo period, Commentaries of Zhu Xi became popular among the samurai, and many warlords, including Tokugawa Ieyasu and Kato Kiyomasa, began to read the *Analects* with Fujiwara Seika. In 1615, Tokugawa Ieyasu unified Japan, ending a long period of chaos and starting the reign of the Tokugawa Shogunate, the last feudal dynasty in Japan. The Tokugawa shogunate wanted to uphold the status system and class structure of the scholar, farmer artisan and merchant, and to consolidate their feudal rule by “using the poetry and books to dispel the spirit of war and revolution”. Tokugawa Ieyasu received the teachings of Fujiwara Seika and advocated Confucianism as the orthodoxy of official schooling in the Edo period, promoting moralism, causing the Confucianism of the Song dynasty, including commentaries on the *Analects* by Zhu Xi, to leap to the core of official schooling. In addition to the Kyoto Neo-Confucianism, represented by Fujiwara Seika, there were also local Neo-Confucianisms with their own characteristics, such as the Haixi Neo-Confucianism with its folk Confucianism, the Osaka Neo-Confucianism with its Machijin culture, and the Hainan Neo-Confucianism with its Shinto culture. Various folk Neo-Confucianisms were established in Japan, and there was an unprecedented enthusiasm for the study of the *Analects*.

### III. DIVERSITY IN THE STUDY OF THE ANALECTS

Before the introduction of the Commentary of Zhu Xi to Japan, the Collected Commentaries by He Yan were the main reference for Japanese to read the *Analects*, as well as other ancient commentaries by Zheng Xuan and Huang Kan. According to an examination by Hayashi Taisuke, the majority of the surviving ancient commentaries on the *Analects* in Japan are copies that appeared after the Kamakura period. The reception of the *Analects* in Japan during this period was not high, and only remained at the level of circulation and understanding, but the inheritance and reading of the ancient commentaries made an objective contribution to the effectiveness of the dissemination of the *Analects*, and provided the academic foundation for the later dissemination of new commentaries and the flourishing of scholarly research.

In contrast to the ancient commentaries, which focused on the exegesis of names and characteristics of objects, the Collected Commentaries on *Analects* by Zhu Xi is distinguished most by its focus on the exposition of moral axioms. In the first half of the thirteenth century, Commentaries on *Analects* by Zhu Xi were introduced to Japan and became popular, spreading to the Japanese islands. During the Tokugawa shogunate period, the study of Confucianism in Japan became more active than ever, and Japanese scholars no longer merely followed the lead of Chinese Confucian studies, but began to develop their own creative insights. This vibrant academic atmosphere propelled the development of the study of the *Analects* in Japan. After the middle of the Edo period, the study of the *Analects* emerged as a more comprehensive and open academic situation with the fusion of official, civil and folk studies, followed by the emergence of Horikawa School, Kobunji School, and Eclectic School. Each school of study had its own distinctive approach to the thought of the *Analects*, and the study of Confucianism formed a triumvirate of the Neo-Confucianism, the Yangming school and the Ancient school, and a group of scholars with distinctive Japanese characteristics emerged, such as Fujiwara Seika, Itō Jinsai, Ogyū Sorai, Hayashi Razan, Nakae Tōju and Kumazawa Banzan.

The Neo-Confucianism was represented by Fujiwara Seika and his disciple Hayashi Razan. Fujiwara Seika opposed the philosophy of the traditional classics and advocated a new commentary on Cheng-Zhu school, arguing that the study of classics was not about form but about content. This idea broke with the tradition of the classic schools of Confucianism and initiated the free study of Confucianism by the scholars. Hayashi Razan inherited Fujiwara's free study style and began to teach the *Four Books* at the age of twenty, which was well attended. In contrast to Fujiwara Seika, whose study was mainly based on Cheng-Zhu school with incorporation of Wang-Lu philosophy school, and didn't exclude Buddhism and Taoism, Hayashi Razan was more radical, as he advocated to take Cheng-Zhu school as the main school and to exclude all other doctrines. Afterwards, Hayashi Razan launched an academic polemic against Fujiwara Seika. The result of the polemic was that Hayashi Razan was convinced by the scholarly spirit of Fujiwara Seika. The polemic is significant in the history of Japanese sinology, demonstrating that Japanese scholars had awakened from the laziness of the traditional classicists and had begun to reach the core of the study of Confucianism.

Although Neo-Confucianism was popular during the Edo shogunate period, and was established as the official school of scholarship, its popularity did not lead to the demise of other schools, but rather to a more comprehensive and open academic scene. At a time when the new commentaries were all the rage, an Ancient school arose to refute Neo-Confucianism. The representatives of the Ancient School include Yamaga Sokō, Itō Jinsai and Ogyū Sorai. They were all originally followers of Neo-Confucianism, but later turned to another school of thought when they suspected that Neo-Confucianism was different from that of Confucius and Mencius. Yamaga Sokō and Itō Jinsai both studied the *Analects* and Mencius by reading the original texts directly and exploring the original meanings of Confucius and Mencius without reference to all other commentaries, in order to find out the true spirit of Confucianism as expressed. At the same time, they valued the practice of the ways of Confucius and Mencius and the discursive thinking of Neo-Confucianism. In contrast, Ogyū Sorai used ancient literature and rhetoric as a tool for the study of classics, reading a wide range of poetry and books, browsing the *Four Books*, and writing freely to create a style of ancient literature and rhetoric. The Yangming School emerged around the same time as the Ancient School, and was represented by Nakae Tōju, Kumazawa Banzan and Tominaga Nakamoto. Nakae Tōju studied Neo-Confucianism at first and then studied Yang Ming school and tried to combine Japanese Shinto and Yang Ming school. Inheriting the beliefs of his mentor, Nakae Tōju, Kumazawa Banzan put the idea of "unity of knowledge and action" into practice in the political reform of the domain. According to Tominaga Nakamoto, Confucianism, Buddhism and Shinto share the same philosophy of "sincerity", which is also referred to as "loyalty and faith" in the *Analects*. By the end of the Tokugawa shogunate, the combination of Neo-Confucianism and the Yangming school with the doctrine of "loyalty and filial piety" and the doctrine of "harmony between the Shinto and the Confucians" provided the breeding ground for the consolidation of feudal domination by diversifying the study of Confucianism.

#### IV. POLITICIZATION OF THE RECEPTION PURPOSE OF THE ANALECTS

After the introduction of the *Analects*, Prince Shōtoku attempted to apply Confucianism to his rule as early as the time of Empress Suiko. He promulgated the "Cap Rank System" and the "Seventeen-Article



Constitution”, taking Confucianism as a direct ideological and theoretical basis for his governance. The “Cap Rank System” was named after the Confucian “virtue, benevolence, propriety, sincerity and justice” in Confucians and divided the official ranks into twelve levels, including the Greater and Lesser Virtue, the Greater and Lesser Benevolence, and the Greater and Lesser Propriety, etc., and distinguished them with different colored official caps and uniforms, which created the first feudal hierarchy in Japan <sup>[3]</sup>. The Seventeen-Articles Confucianism were a further reflection of the core of Confucianism. It set out the human relationships between monarch and official, father and son, the duties and responsibilities of officials at all levels, and the obligation of officials to observe feudal regulations and morality, and provided the ideological guidance and political platform for the subsequent Taika Reforms. Since then, the era of Confucianism as the guiding political principle had begun in Japan. According to Yamazaki Ansai, the renowned Japanese sinologist, the purpose of ancient Japan's strong advocacy of the *Analects* was “to benefit its fundamentals”. The ruling class gradually realized that the formation of its own culture and ideology in line with the Confucian historicism tradition was an important basis for maintaining its dominance.

The Daika Reforms in Japan was based on Confucianism and established a centralized feudal system, followed by a major promotion of Confucianism, with the establishment of central college in Kyoto and national and prefectural schools at the local level, stipulating that the Confucian classics such as the *Analects* and the *Classic of Filial Piety* were compulsory subjects, and that the more classics one studied, the higher grades one could achieve and the higher official rank one could serve. With the ruling class actively promoting Confucianism as a criterion for the cultivation and selection of officials, it gave a great impetus to the promotion and prevalence of Confucianism in Japan. In the Asuka Nara period, only Confucian officials were valued by the imperial court, and “loyalty, filial piety, propriety and justice” were the ideological principles for ruling the country and the people. In the Heian period, the Confucian scholar Sugawarano Michizane put forward the concept of “unifying loyalty and filial piety” and “harmonize the Japanese spirit with Chinese classics”, proposing the integration of loyalty and patriotism with feudal ethics, and the absorption of Confucianism into the Japanese national spirit, which represented a new stage in the dissemination of the *Analects* in Japan, i.e. from the stage of mere copying and transplantation to that of localization.

From the Kamakura period, the Cheng-Zhu school from the Song dynasty was introduced and disseminated in Japan, and the Japanese Confucianism of the traditional classics and exegesis was gradually replaced by the benevolent and moral philosophical studies of the Neo-Confucianism, and the Japaneseization of Confucianism entered a stage of development. Since Master Gene discussed with officials in the court of Emperor Daigo about the *Analects* and lectured on the philosophy of Song Dynasty with the *Four Books* by Zhu Xi as the basis, he started a new generation of the studies of the Song Dynasty in Japan. Later, Japanese scholars went further to exegete on the classics such as the *Analects*, providing translations and interpretations of the exegetical meanings of Chinese characters. This approach was not only significant for the popularization and enhancement of Confucian classics in Japan, but also infused the understanding and elaboration of the original texts of Japanese scholars, which in turn objectively contributed to the process of localization. Secondly, the Neo-Confucianism combined Confucianism with

Japanese Shinto. Fujiwara Seika mentioned in his *Kana Shiya Uri* that “the Japanese Shinto was also aimed to take people to righteousness, and to show compassion and mercy to the people, which was also the ultimate goal of the doctrine of Yao and Shun. It was called Confucianism in Tang China and Shinto in Japan. They were called differently, but the spirit was the same.”<sup>[4]</sup> Hayashi Razan inherited and developed Fujiwara Seika’s doctrine of the “unity Shinto and Confucianism”, believing that the unity of Shinto and Confucianism was inevitable, and that way of the emperor changes to the way of the Shinto, and the way of the Shinto changes to the way of the emperor, and the way of the emperor was what I called the way of Confucianism. Thirdly, Confucianism enriched and developed the spirit of Bushido. Early in the 16th century, Confucianism developed as never before in Japan and gradually penetrated the samurai class. By the time of the Tokugawa Shogunate, martial politics and Neo-Confucianism were united and rapidly spread across the islands. Bushido may be referred to as a Japanese style Confucianism, a particular culture that developed against the background of the feudal system of Japan, and Confucianism can be considered the richest source of the Bushido spirit. It was based on the Cheng-Zhu school, with “loyalty” and “faith” of Confucianism as its core moral principles, and was also imbued with Japanese folk customs and culture. Bushido despised cowardice and timidity, and adhered to the motto of “not to sacrifice benevolence to seek life, but to sacrifice life to achieve benevolence” and “to sacrifice life for justice”, and believed the justice was more important than life. In the late period of the Tokugawa shogunate, “loyalty and filial piety, heroic courage, righteousness, honor and respect” were imposed as mandatory samurai tenets, which further strengthened and consolidated the feudal human relations within the ruling class.

The *Analects* had been revered by successive generations of feudal rulers since it was introduced to Japan. The rulers promoted Confucianism and infiltrated it into the Japanese national ideology. The fundamental spirit of Confucian Japanization was impregnated in the long-established “Yamato-damashii”, which is known as the spirit of the Japanese nation, and became the core of Japanese social and political thoughts in ancient times.

## V. POPULARIZATION OF THE DISSEMINATION CLASS OF THE ANALECTS

In the Heian Nara period, the ancient commentaries on the *Analects* were circulated in a relatively narrow range. Firstly, Members of the royal family would have been the first class to come into contact with the *Analects*. The story of Ujino Wakiirazuko, the Emperor Ōjin’s prince, surrendered the throne to his elder brother, Ohosazakino Sumeramikoto, was said to be a parody of the intention of the story “Taibo, who was the most moral man of all. He surrendered the throne to Jiri for so many times that the people could not find the right words to praise him”. It can be seen that the early Japanese imperial family took an active interest in and drew on the political and ethical ideology of Confucianism. Secondly, the literati bureaucrats were the main force behind the establishment of the state apparatus and the main audience for Confucianism. At the time of Emperor Monmu, the *Taihō Code* stated that “both the *Classic of Filial Piety* and the *Analects* shall be studied by scholars”, stipulating that the *Analects* and the *Classic of Filial Piety* were compulsory subjects and an important reference for the upper classes, including aristocrats and officials, to enhance their cultivation and education. By the mid to late 7th century, the Japanese court had established a central college, and then national schools at the local level, to teach the Confucian classics.

These were the first educational institutions in Japan to cultivate officials and important carriers for the dissemination of Confucian classics such as the *Analects*, which produced a large number of talented and learned scholars who were well versed in Chinese Confucianism. In the 9th century, in addition to the official schools, local gentry also founded private schools to educate their descendants. A special mention should be made of the fact that Master Kūkai, who had studied in China, founded the private school named Shuchiin College upon his return to Japan, where he combined Confucianism with Buddhist thought, citing the *Analects* alongside the Buddhist text, the Mahāvairocana Tantra, as the core of his educational principles. The private school founded by Kūkai was not limited in its educational audience, enrolling the children of monks and the common class alike, providing them with the opportunity to learn about Confucianism. For rulers, the *Analects* was a major tool in their quest for power, in their grasp of governance, and in their ruling of the country, while officials studied it to improve their personal learning or to promote themselves to higher posts, the literati took it as material for eulogizing the benevolence and virtue of the ruler and for describing literary elegance. It is thus evident that the ancient commentaries on the *Analects* had a restricted audience in early Japan, being disseminated and studied only within the confines of the rulers, the intellectual class, and the official and private schools.

The popularization of the *Analects* among the common class in Japan began in the Edo period, mainly through the Terakoya, the private schools set up by the temples. As one of the most distinctive features of medieval Japanese education, the Terakoya originated in the mid to late Muromachi period in the 15th century and was first established and managed by temples to provide primary education for the common class, which was similar to that of a modern primary schools. During the Edo period, the demand for education among the common class grew with political stability and economic prosperity, and the Terakoya was no longer confined to the temple grounds, but expanded to the private housing of the people. It was estimated that there were approximately 20, 000 Terakoya houses in the Edo period, which gradually took a dominant role in the education of the society. The curriculum offered at the Terakoya focused on vocabulary, supplemented by reading, and the Confucian classics, the *Analects* and the *Classic of Filial Piety*, were among the key teaching materials. At the end of the Edo period, Terakoya not only developed rapidly in the cities, but also set up in remote mountain and fishing villages. The development of the Terakoya had also brought about a dramatic change in the reception audience for the *Analects*. In addition to the aristocratic officials and literary monks, the ordinary samurai class and the common people of the towns also became readers of the *Analects*. In addition to the education popularization of the *Analects*, the Tokugawa Shogunate also exploited the Confucian doctrines of the “three fundamental bonds and five constant virtues” and the “unity of nature and humanity” to sanctify and legitimize the feudal hierarchy and legalize Confucian ideas such as the “doctrine of loyalty and filial piety”, making them a social charter that the people had to observe through the enactment and enforcement of Confucianized laws and regulations. The further expansion of the reception base of the *Analects* enabled Confucianism to infiltrate all levels of Japanese society and to influence the ideology of the Japanese public extensively and profoundly.



## VI. CONCLUSION

The eastern dissemination of the *Analects* to Japan exerted a profound influence on all areas of Japanese politics, culture and ideology. The characteristics of the reception of the *Analects* by Japanese people varied greatly under different historical and cultural contexts in terms of subject, object, approach, purpose and level. Throughout more than a thousand years of feudal domination, ancient Japan was constantly drawing on the wisdom and nourishment of the Confucian classics, enriching the moral content of Japanese society and forming a system of Confucian thought with Japanese characteristics, which was also of great significance for cultural exchanges and academic convergence between China and Japan.

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