



**Yamazaki Nobuo** 山崎庸男『安藤昌益の実像：近代的視点を  
超えて』[*The Real Andō Shōeki: Looking beyond the Modern  
Perspective*]

Tokyo: Nōbunkyō, 2016. 285 pages. ¥1,944. ISBN: 978-4540152221.

Yamazaki Nobuo's *The Real Andō Shōeki's* is a rather ambitious book that tries to be a comprehensive compendium of the life and work of Andō Shōeki (1703–1762), the little known philosopher of Tokugawa Japan. I call it “ambitious” because it

attempts not only to shed light on Shōeki's life, but also to present, synthetically yet comprehensively, the gist of his philosophical ideas, and the way in which his writings were discovered, read, and interpreted by Japanese and Western scholars.

But before I review the book, allow me a short digression. I have been conducting research on Andō Shōeki and his philosophical ideas for several years now, and I have in my office a rather extensive collection of books, articles, and other documents that have been published so far, both in Japanese and in other languages (mostly English and French). These include, of course, the excellent edition of the complete works 『安藤昌益全集』 published by Nōbunkyō, but also biographies of the philosopher, monographies about the Hachinohe area in the Tokugawa period, comparisons with other thinkers such as Miura Baien or Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and, last but not least, several works of fiction in which Shōeki is the protagonist. What I find surprising about all these books and materials is the fact that a significant proportion of them are actually written or prepared by non-specialists, i.e. people who are not necessarily involved in the academic world as researchers, but for some reason become interested in Shōeki and his works and embark on a personal journey to dissect and interpret them. This is not to say that I believe all research should be conducted exclusively by academics, quite the contrary—I think there are plenty of outstanding papers, articles and books produced by non-academics. However, in Shōeki's case, the high number of non-academics who engage with his work is intriguing to say the least. But why does this happen? Is it because so little is known about his life? Is it because his ideas appeal to the general public? Is it because the number of academics who study Shōeki's works is still relatively low? I believe these are important questions, and hopefully in the future there will be studies that can provide some answers.

To end this digression, let me just add that Yamazaki Nobuo is also part of the category of authors I mentioned above: according to his short bio, he is not a researcher, but a high school teacher somewhere in Chiba prefecture who is interested in local history and who, in his free time, conducts research on Shōeki's philosophy. Apart from contributions to volumes about the history of the city of Kimitsu, he also published several articles on Shōeki's ideas about medicine. That said, let me now go back on track.

The book consists of a preface, two parts, and an afterword. In the brief, two-page preface, Yamazaki announces the main ten points he wants to discuss in the book, which are as follows:

1. The true essence of Shōeki's thought as an amalgamation of old and new concepts, i.e., as a mixture of Daoist and Confucianist principles, and revolutionary ideas such as gender equality and the absence of hierarchy in human society;

2. The reevaluation of Kanō Kōkichi's role in forging the image of Andō Shōeki as a philosopher;
3. The reasons why a copy of the manuscript of 『自然真當道』 (*The True Way of the Functioning of Nature*), Shōeki's major work, was found in Kita Senjū;
4. An analysis of the so-called "Ōdate documents," a series of Shōeki-related materials discovered in the city of Ōdate in present-day Akita prefecture;
5. The need to discuss the proposition that the development of Shōeki's philosophical ideas was triggered by his firsthand experience of the Tōhoku famine and of the predicament of the farmers in the Hachinohe area;
6. The idea that Shōeki's understanding of medicine developed independently of the so-called "medical debate" of the Hōreki era (1751–1764), influenced by the publication of Rangaku anatomy treatises;
7. A detailed analysis of *shizen* (自然), *shin* (真) and other key concepts, in order to demonstrate that Shōeki's understanding of *shizen* is different from the modern intension of the notion, and from the meaning of the English word "nature";
8. The hypothesis that Shōeki's criticism of the four social classes (士農工商) is not directed at the hierarchy imposed by the Tokugawa régime, but at the "sages of old," i.e., the Chinese scholars responsible for the invention of the "laws" that have perverted human society by making it deviate from the "True Way of Nature";
9. The hypothesis that Shōeki's criticism of imported ideologies such as Daoism and Confucianism stems from his strong nationalism and the Shintoist background of his thought;
10. The need to reconsider the theory that Shōeki did indeed hold the so-called "Hachinohe symposium," where he allegedly exposed his philosophical ideas to a small gathering of disciples from all over Japan.

As can be seen from this list as well, Yamazaki's is indeed an ambitious project.

The first part of the book focuses on the discovery of Shōeki's manuscripts, the first researchers of his ideas (Kanō Kōkichi and E. Herbert Norman), and the small number of extant materials that document his life. In his effort to be as thorough as possible, Yamazaki takes an excursion to all the places that are associated with Shōeki, from Kyoto, where he received his Buddhist training, to Hachinohe, where he worked as a physician, and then to Ōdate, where he spent the final years of his life. Throughout this part, Yamazaki constantly refers to the ten points he laid out in the preface and attempts to provide answers to them. To give just an example, he dedicates a whole section to number (2) above, arguing that Shōeki never actually criticized Tokugawa Ieyasu (as Kanō Kōkichi had suggested), but in fact referred to him

in a respectful, deferential manner. In his *démarche*, he quotes extensively from Shōeki's writings, including less known texts that are usually overlooked, such as 『私法神書卷』 (*Shinō as Private Law*).

The second part, the bulkiest, is dedicated to the development and evolution of Shōeki's thought. Thus, Yamazaki identifies three main stages—early, middle and late—in Shōeki's philosophy, and discusses them separately. He traces the evolution of two concepts (*shizen* 自然, and *shin* 真) throughout these stages and proposes that they constitute a sort of “core” (核心) of Shōeki's work, underpinning all other ideas and notions. Yamazaki implies that these concepts represent the main point of interest for Shōeki, and that his whole philosophy is in fact developed around them as a system of thought that is rather schematic and sometimes incoherent at first, but gradually becomes more and more consistent and convincing. Of course, he discusses other concepts as well (*ki* 気, *chokkō* 直耕, *tenchi* 転定 etc.), but suggests that they are subaltern to the two mentioned above, in that they are merely used to explain the intricacies of the world of Nature.

In most cases, Yamazaki's arguments and demonstrations are rigorous and meticulous and, as I have already said, he cites extensively from the original to prove his point. In some instances, however, he fails to make a convincing case; for example, when exploring the point mentioned at number (9) in the preface, he puts forth the idea that Shōeki's thought is fundamentally Shintoist, which is an idea that has already been debated and refuted in the literature, particularly by Terao in his commentaries to the Nōbunkyō edition of Shōeki's complete works. In this respect, Yamazaki's argument lacks clarity and power of persuasion.

Another aspect where I felt that Yamazaki pushes his interpretation too far is the idea that there is a nationalistic vein informing Shōeki's thought, which would explain his criticism of extraneous ideologies such as Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. In my view—and I am in agreement with most Shōeki scholars here—Shōeki perceives these ideologies more in terms of their potential to institute and regulate hierarchies within society, thus estranging the human being from the realm of Nature. He does not insist upon their origin, and in fact he includes Shintō in the same category of ideologies contrived by the “sages of old.” To my mind, it is not nationalism that informs this view, but rather a deeply sympathetic, humanistic perspective of society and of the human being.

In conclusion, I would say that Yamazaki's book feels incomplete and unconvincing *precisely* because it is so ambitious: it attempts to be comprehensive and cover all the major concepts put forth by Shōeki but, in doing so, it is constrained in many instances to a superficial discussion, which ultimately produces very few new insights. For example, the section dedicated to Shōeki's vision of the human being is only three pages long, and extremely schematic—not to say simplistic—as it com-

pletely ignores the distinction that Shōeki makes between the World of Nature on the one hand, and human society on the other.

However, Yamazaki does raise some interesting questions that deserve a thorough examination, such as the idea that Shōeki's understanding of *shizen* differs from our modern interpretation of the notion of "nature" and that it should probably be rendered with a different term in English. On this point, I agree with him, as I believe this might be a topic relevant not only for Shōeki's thought but for Japanese philosophy in general. Therefore, I would recommend the book as a good starting point for a serious, rigorous debate about the status and role of philosophy in the intellectual landscape of Tokugawa Japan, and about the Japanese vision of Nature and its place within a wider, global context.

Roman PAȘCA

*Kanda University of International Studies, Japan*