

## THE HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY OF THE JAPANESE CONCEPT OF VIRTUE

A TRAJETÓRIA HISTÓRICA DO CONCEITO JAPONÊS DE VIRTUDE

KOJI TACHIBANA<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The historical trajectory of the Japanese concept of virtue, “*toku* (徳)”, has been relatively neglected by scholars. Dividing Japanese history into five periods, I examine this concept and reveal four of its features. First, the prototype of this concept is Buddhist rather than Confucian. Second, Confucian colouration became distinct after the mid-17th century, reaching its peak in the early 20th century. Third, Aristotle’s notion of virtue has been warmly welcomed by Japanese intellectuals since the late 19th century. Fourth, since the late 20th century, this concept has become an amalgam of Buddhist, Confucian, and Western-Christian notions of virtue.

**Keywords:** Amalgam, Aristotle, Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, Missionaries.

**Resumo:** A trajetória histórica do conceito japonês de virtude, “*toku* (徳)”, tem sido relativamente negligenciada pelos estudiosos. Dividindo a história japonesa em cinco períodos, examino esse conceito e revelo quatro de suas características. Primeiro, o protótipo desse conceito é budista e não confucionista. Segundo, a influência confucionista tornou-se distinta após meados do século XVII, atingindo seu auge no início do século XX. Em terceiro lugar, a noção aristotélica de virtude foi calorosamente acolhida pelos intelectuais japoneses

抄録

日本の徳概念の歴史的軌跡は比較的軽視されてきた。本論文では、日本史を五つの時期に分けてこの概念を検証し、以下の四特徴を明らかにする。第一に、この概念の原型は儒教的ではなく仏教的である。第二に、儒教的色彩は17世紀半ば以降に顕著となり、20世紀初頭に頂点に達した。第三に、アリストテレスの徳概念は19世紀後半から日本の知識人に好意的に受け入れられてきた。第四に、20世紀後半以降、この概念は仏教的・儒学的・西洋キリスト教的

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<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities, Chiba University, Japan; Email: [koji.tachibana@chiba-u.jp](mailto:koji.tachibana@chiba-u.jp); ORCID: 0000-0001-5203-7081

desde o final do século XIX. Em quarto lugar, desde o final do século XX, este conceito tornou-se uma amálgama das noções budistas, confucionistas e cristãs ocidentais de virtude.

**Palavras-chave:** Amálgama, Aristóteles, Budismo, Confucionismo, Cristianismo, Missionários.

な徳観念が融合した複合体となった。

混合, アリストテレス, 仏教, 儒教, キリスト教, 宣教師.

## Introduction

The notion of virtue has different prototypes in different traditions. On the one hand, the prototype of the Western notion of virtue can be found in the theories of the ancient Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, or in the cardinal and theological virtues in Christianity. On the other hand, the prototype of Chinese virtue can be found in the theory of Confucius.

Then, where does the prototype of the Japanese concept of virtue lie? Let us see the witnesses of two outstanding Western scholars. In his preface for Japanese readers of (the Japanese translation of) *After Virtue*, A. MacIntyre says that the “Japanese tradition of virtue, which confronts Japanese modernisation, could be found in the works of Japanese authors who applied neo-Confucianism (doctrines of Zhu Xi) to Japanese society”.<sup>2</sup> The authors mentioned here are Japanese philosophers who introduced neo-Confucianism into Japan during the feudalistic Edo period, such as Seika Fujiwara (藤原惺窩) and Razan Hayashi (林羅山). H.-I. Marrou, a historian of ancient Greek and Roman education, sees a certain analogy between Homeric chivalry, which is the origin of the ancient Greek notion of virtue, and Japanese feudalism, saying “I speak of Homeric chivalry, in the same way as one talks about ‘Japanese feudalism’”.<sup>3</sup> Both MacIntyre and Marrou assume in common that the prototype of the Japanese concept of virtue can be found in feudalism in the age of the Edo period (or Tokugawa shogunate: 1603–1867).

We can doubt this kind of assumption because the implications of the notion of virtue can change in the course of history. For instance, in Western

<sup>2</sup> A. MacIntyre, *Japanese Translation of After Virtue*, Translated by Sakae Shinozaki (Tokyo: Misuzu-shobo, 1993), vii. This quotation is my English translation from Japanese. The original document that MacIntyre sent to the translator, Sakae Shinozaki, was bound to be written in English. However, we cannot access the original document.

<sup>3</sup> H.-I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (New York: The New American Library, 1956), 4.

society, the evolution of modern individualism and the collapse of Christian society are said to cause such changes.<sup>4</sup> Against normative ethical theories, such as deontology and utilitarianism, as well as metaethical theories, such as Hare's prescriptivism and Ayer's logical positivism, virtue ethics was revived in the 1950s, led by, for example, Anscombe's monumental article.<sup>5</sup> Also in China, ancient Confucianism underwent various twists and faded from the historical stage. It came back in the 1950s as the declaration of contemporary neo-Confucianism.<sup>6</sup>

Accordingly, we should first consider a historical trajectory of the Japanese concept of virtue to capture the image of the concept. To the best of my knowledge, however, we do not have sufficient clues for this because of the scarcity of related research. For example, the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy and Thought* (1998) is one of the most comprehensive and reliable encyclopaedias of philosophy in Japan. This covers philosophical thought from both the East and the West, and accordingly, it also has the entry "virtue", which describes this concept in detail over four pages (20 paragraphs). However, less than one page (five paragraphs) deals with the Eastern notion of virtue, and it only explains Confucian virtue in ancient China, with no mention of virtue in Japan at all.<sup>7</sup>

We can find a similar example in a more recent publication. In 2020, the Association for Japanese Intellectual History, the largest academic society of Japanese philosophy, published the *Encyclopedia of Japanese Intellectual History*.<sup>8</sup> However, this does not include the entry for "virtue".

These references suggest that the Japanese concept of virtue may not be considered a significant topic to be studied in Japanese academia for some reasons: this notion might be considered as indistinct from the Chinese notion of virtue, or it may simply not attract the interest of Japanese scholars. Although these are just speculations, as I shall show in this paper, clues for understanding the Japanese concept of virtue are seriously fragmented, and accordingly, we must reconstruct them in a patchwork-like manner to obtain a chronological perspective on this notion. Against this circumstance, in this

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<sup>4</sup> A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (USA: Notre Dame University Press 1981) and D. Frede "The Historic Decline of Virtue Ethics" In *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics* Edited by Daniel C. Russell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 124–148.

<sup>5</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy", *Philosophy*, 33: 1–19.

<sup>6</sup> Z. Mou, X. Fuguan, Z. Junmai & T. Junyi, "The manifesto on behalf of Chinese culture was respectfully announced to the people of the world" (1958).

<sup>7</sup> I. Konami, "Virtue", in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy and Thought* edited by W. Hiromatsu et al. (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten Publishers, 1998), 1172–1175.

<sup>8</sup> Association for Japanese Intellectual History, *Encyclopedia of Japanese Intellectual History* (Tokyo: Maruzen Publishing, 2020).

paper, I focus on the Japanese word “virtue (*toku*: 徳)” and attempt to trace the trajectory.<sup>9</sup>

### 1. From the 5th to the 15 centuries: Acceptance of the Buddhist notion of virtue

The Chinese character of virtue, “徳 (Chinese pronunciation: *dè*, Japanese pronunciation: *toku*)”, consists of two parts (“彳” + “惠”), of which “惠” consists of two further parts (“直” + “心”). Accordingly, this character means “doing or going around (彳=行) with a righteous (直) heart (心)”.<sup>10</sup> In ancient China, this word was used in both Buddhism and Confucianism. In Chinese Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhist scriptures written in Sanskrit were brought to China around the beginning of the Common Era. When these were translated into Chinese, the Sanskrit words “*gunṇa* (good quality)” and “*punya* (good deed and its benefit)” were translated as “徳”.<sup>11</sup> In Confucianism, as seen in the phrase “徳者得也 (In Japanese: 徳は得なり)” mentioned in the Record on the Subject of Music (樂記) chapter of the *Book of Rites* (『礼記』), virtue is considered an acquired character trait of a person. In the Practice of Government (為政) chapter of *The Analects of Confucius* (『論語』), virtue is mentioned as “為政以德 (in Japanese: 政を為すに徳を以てす)” and “道之以徳 (in Japanese: 之を導くに徳を以てす)”, meaning the excellent political ability of governors. Such a Confucian notion of virtue is considered a kind of psychic power “that an individual possesses to influence and attract other people and even the surrounding environment ... without appealing to physical force”.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, the traditional worldview in Japan is based on Shintoism, which worships a kind of animism, “every being as a god (八百万神: *yaorozu-no-kami*)”. Ancient Chinese people recognised the difference between Shintoism and Confucianism. In the *Treatise on the Wa People* (『魏志倭人伝』), a report written by Han Dynasty officials who visited Japan at the end of the 3rd century, the religious power wielded by the Japanese que-

<sup>9</sup> Please note that I do not intend discuss the so-called “Nihonjin-ron (日本人論)”, a patriotic debate on the Japanese spirit. See Y. Arisaka, “The Controversial Cultural Identity of Japanese Philosophy”, in Bret W. Davis (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 755–780.

<sup>10</sup> S. Shirakawa, *Understanding Words* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> M. Yorizumi, “On Virtue in Japanese Buddhism”, in M. Kurozumi (ed.), *Body of Thoughts: Virtue* (Tokyo: Shunjusha, 2007), 127–160.

<sup>12</sup> J. Yu, *The Ethics of Confucius and Aristotle: Mirrors of Virtue* (Oxford: Routledge, 2007), 30.

en, Himiko (卑弥呼), was described as “鬼道 (*kido*; shamanistic power)”, indicating that her governing strategy was different from Confucianism.

Around the 5th century, Buddhism and Confucianism were introduced to Japan through exchanges with China and Korea. The word and concept of “virtue (徳)” were also likely introduced at this time. As a result, Japan came to embody a mixture of the ancient Shintoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

The influence of these traditions can be seen in the first written constitution in Japan, the *Seventeen Article Constitution* (『十七条憲法』), which was published around 604. For example, Article II established Buddhism as the final basis of all life, thereby establishing a Buddhist-oriented law, whilst Article III proclaimed a Confucian relationship between the ruler and the people.

However, Buddhism, not Confucianism, took more root among the Japanese people. Merging with Shintoism, Buddhism shaped the ethical values and worldview of the Japanese people. Accordingly, the Japanese concept of virtue was first formed from the Buddhist perspective. This concept came to mean “the power and potentiality that the person acquires”, which can be expressed by the Buddhist expression “功德 (*kudoku*)”.<sup>13</sup> In particular, as seen in the *Nihon Ryōiki* (『日本靈異記』), the oldest collection of Buddhist tales in Japan, the central meaning of Japanese virtue was the supernatural power of saints and sutras in Buddhism, such as restoring sight to the blind through faith. Thus, the Japanese concept of virtue implies the idea that virtue is a supernatural power that enables individuals to obtain something good.<sup>14</sup>

Buddhism spread among the general population from the 12th century (Kamakura period) onwards through the dissemination of moral teachings based on Buddhist principles and Buddhist activities (作善).<sup>15</sup> Along with the spread of Buddhism, Buddhist concepts of virtue, such as 功德, also became popular among the lay people. In this way, the Japanese concept of “*toku*” became established among Japanese people as a Buddhist concept over a period of approximately 700 years.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> M. Kurozumi, “What is Virtue for humans?”, *Body of Thoughts: Virtue*, 30.

<sup>14</sup> Yorizumi, “On Virtue in Japanese Buddhism”, 142–145, 156.

<sup>15</sup> H. Omochi, “Principles of Moral Education in Medieval Arts”, in Y. Oshitani et al. (eds.), *The New Encyclopedia of Moral Education, vol I*. (Tokyo: Gakubunsha, 2021), 209–212.

<sup>16</sup> Later, Kitabatake Chikafusa (北畠親房: 1293–1354) expounded on the virtues of the divine nation of Japan. He converged religious goals of some virtues, such as honesty, mercy, and wisdom, into Japan as a divine nation (Kurozumi, “What is Virtue for humans?”, 70–71).

Confucianism was in the shadow of this trajectory. As Hoobler and Hoobler put it, Confucianism “did not sink deep roots among the [Japanese] people, as Buddhism did”.<sup>17</sup> Of course, the intellectual class, such as politicians and scholars, had to study Confucianism.<sup>18</sup> As Kasulis mentions, “[f]rom the seventh century, texts traditionally associated with Confucianism served as the core curriculum in the imperial academy for the education of courtiers and bureaucratic officials”.<sup>19</sup> That was because the knowledge about Confucianism was essential for absorbing knowledge from and conducting diplomacy with China. Although it is not easy to identify the scope of the influence of Confucianism on institutions<sup>20</sup>, we can say this: it is one thing for intellectuals to study Confucianism and implement it into institutions, and quite another for the general Japanese public to internalise its values. As we will see in Section 3, the Confucian notion of virtue did not become widespread among the public until the late 17th century.

## 2. From the late 16th to the early 17th centuries: Before the impact of neo-Confucianism

In the 1540s, firearms and Christianity were introduced to Japan by Western merchants and missionaries who arrived on Tanegashima Island (種子島). Although Japan had engaged in trade mainly with East Asian countries, their arrival marked the beginning of the absorption of Western culture. From catalogues of Western books written in Dutch, which were imported to Japan during the Edo period, we can recognise that knowledge related to natural sciences, particularly medicine and astronomy, was broadly absorbed. Among them, we can find works reflecting Aristotelian views of nature and the cosmos, as well as Aesop’s fables. However, based on currently available sources, ancient Greek ethical thought was not introduced.<sup>21</sup> Given this,

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<sup>17</sup> D. Hoobler and T. Hoobler, *Confucianism, the third edition* (New York: Chelsea House, 2016), 72.

<sup>18</sup> J. McMullen, *The Worship of Confucius in Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> T. Kasulis, “Japanese Philosophy”, in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University, 2019) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/japanese-philosophy/>.

<sup>20</sup> For example, the names of individual virtues were used to order the ranks for official and court. Tucker, “Japanese Neo-Confucian”, in Bret W. Davis (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022, 273–290) explains the order is based on Confucianism, whereas Kurozumi (“What is Virtue for humans?”, 63) says that the order looks like Confucian but is Buddhist.

<sup>21</sup> See Y. Nagatsumi, *18th-century Dutch Book Orders and their Distribution* (Saitama: Yoko Nagatsumi, 1998) and Watanabe, *The History of Western Classical Bibliography in*

we can assume that the ancient Greek concept of virtue was not introduced either.

One might expect that Christian concepts of virtue spread among the followers because Christianity began to be preached in some regions, even though it was finally banned by the Edo shogunate. However, I do not think such an expectation is the case. As I shall show in this section, until the mid-17th century, non-Buddhist concepts of virtue, such as Confucian virtue or Western philosophical or Christian virtue, were not firmly established as part of the moral worldview of the Japanese lay people.

We can find clues for this in two dictionaries published by missionaries in the late 16th to early 17th centuries.

Since the arrival of Francis Xavier, a Jesuit missionary who reached Japan in 1549, missionaries devoted themselves to spreading Christianity in Japan. They had to translate Christian concepts into Japanese to explain Christian ideas to the general public. However, the translation was not easy because Japanese lay people were not familiar with Christian moral concepts at all. Therefore, the translations had to be something that could appeal to the Japanese moral worldview, which includes their mindset and moral values. For example, during the early days of Christian missionary work in Japan, Christian terms were translated into Buddhist terms: “God” was translated as “大日如来 (Dainichi)”, “Mary” as “観音 (Kannon)”, and “Heaven” as “極楽 (Gokuraku)”.<sup>22</sup> Although these translations are not accurate, they were rightly chosen because these Japanese words appealed to the mindset and moral worldview of Japanese laypeople.

In this respect, it was necessary for missionaries to identify which Japanese words most closely corresponded to each of the Western moral values. Accordingly, the Japanese dictionaries compiled by such missionaries can provide information concerning (1) the correspondence table between the Japanese moral worldview and the Christian one and (2) the list of concepts that were important to the Japanese moral worldview of the time.

Therefore, by examining the Japanese dictionaries compiled by missionaries, we can gain the following two insights into the moral worldview of the Japanese lay people at the time. First, whether the Japanese word

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*Japan, Four Volumes* (Kyoto: Tanaka Print, 2001–2003). However, since Aristotle’s ethical ideas were accepted and translated into Chinese in the first half of the 17th century, it cannot be ruled out that they were brought to Japan in some way (see K. Tachibana, “The Reception History of Aristotle’s Theory of Education in Japan”, in T. Kondo and K. Tachibana (eds.), *Aristotle in Japan: Reception, Interpretation and Application* (Oxford: Routledge, 2025), Chapter 1, n. 7.

22 A. Hirakawa, *Warring States Period of Japan and the Age of Exploration* (Tokyo: Chuko-shinsho, 2018), 46–47.

“徳 (*toku*)” corresponds to the Western word “virtue”. Second, whether and to what extent the Japanese word “徳” was important for the moral worldview of Japanese laypeople at that time.

The answer to the first question can be found by examining the *Latin-Portuguese-Japanese Dictionary* (『羅葡日対訳辞典』) (*Dictionarivm Latino Lvsitanicvm ac Iaponicvm. In Amacvsa Collegio Iaponico Societatis IESV*), compiled in 1595.<sup>23</sup> Since this dictionary lists the Japanese equivalents of Latin words and their Portuguese translations, this includes an entry for “virtus”. In the entry, it lists 17 Japanese translations, including “jen (善: good)”, “dôri (道理: logos)”, “tadaxisa (正しさ: justice)”, and “yûqi (勇氣: courage)”. However, the word “toku (徳: virtue)” is not included. The Japanese term that appears to be the closest in meaning is the Buddhist term “cudocu (功德; merit)”, which is listed as the 15th translation. Though not decisive, this indicates that (missionaries thought) the Japanese word “toku (徳)”, when used on its own, did not have a meaning important enough to be included in their dictionary as a translation of the Western concept of “virtue”.

The second question can be addressed by examining the *Japanese-Portuguese Dictionary* (『日葡辞書』) (*Vocabvlario da Lingoa de Iapam com a declaração em Portugues, Nangafaqui no Collegio de Iapam da Companhia de IESVS*), compiled in 1603. This dictionary explains the meanings of Japanese terms at the time in Portuguese. Therefore, by examining the related entries in this dictionary, we can have insights concerning which Japanese words were considered important for missionaries to understand the Japanese moral worldview at that time.

This dictionary has the modern-Japanese-translation edition, which was published in 1980, for those who have difficulty in reading Portuguese and Latinised Japanese handwritings. In this modern edition, we can find the entry for “tocu (徳; virtue)”, explaining that this word has four meanings: “Co (孤; loneliness)”, “Fôxin (報身; retribution)”, “Meicun (名君; good ruler)”, and “Motefayaxi, su, aita (持てはやし、す、いた; to lionise)”.<sup>24</sup> However, this entry was inserted by the 20th-century scholars of this edition. The original version of 1603 does not include the entry for “tocu”. This suggests that, for the missionaries who compiled this dictionary, the Japanese word “toku” did not appear to be an important concept when they appealed to the moral mindset or worldview of the general Japanese population. Alternatively, or

<sup>23</sup> Mr. Mitsutake Ikeda kindly informed me that this dictionary is said to be based on a Latin-Italian dictionary, *Dictionarium Latinum*, published by Rhegium Lingobardum in 1502.

<sup>24</sup> Tadao Doi et al., *Japanese Translation of Dictionarivm Latino Lvsitanicvm ac Iaponicvm*. Edited and Translated by T. Doi et al. (Tokyo: Iwanami-shoten, 1980), 654.

additionally, for Japanese, the word “toku” did not appear to be an important concept when they explained their moral mindset or worldview to missionaries. Even if we look at the other parts of the dictionary, we can find two things. First, missionaries recognised the existence of this word as meaning “good talents and abilities (boas partes et boas habilidades)”. Second, despite such recognition, the Japanese word “toku” appeared only in limited contexts, such as Buddhist terms or scholarly expressions derived from the *Four Books*.<sup>25</sup> This means that the word “toku” may not have been an important concept for the Japanese laypeople at the time.

Let us summarise this section. In dictionaries of the late 16th and early 17th centuries, that is, just before the introduction of Neo-Confucianism,

<sup>25</sup> Here I summarise the description of the entry for “toku” in the modern version (1980), as follows:

[ Entry ] Tocu(徳): →Co, Fôxin, Meicun, Motefayaxi, su, aita.

[ 1 ] Co (孤): 徳toku孤ならず、必ず隣有り<sup>1)</sup>。優れた才幹や能力 (boas partes et boas habilidades) をもつ者は、人に知られないでいることはあり得ない。<sup>1)</sup> 天草版金句集では「徳はひとりとは居ぬ。必ず他に施す」とあり、本書の説明とは少し異なる。

[ 2 ] Fôxin (報身): 仏に三身の徳ありと言ふ、二番目の名なり。

[ 3 ] Meicun (名君): 方正な君主 (Senhor recto)。政の正しさは、名君の徳tokuなり (四書)。政治が厳正であるのは、良い君主、あるいは、国王のすぐれた徳と才能 (virtude, et boa parte) による。

[ 4 ] Motefayaxi, su, aita (持てはやし、す、いた): 尊重して、引き立てる。例、Tocumo nai mono naredomo mote fayaxeba, tocuno aruyôni miyuru. (徳も無い者なれども持てはやせば、徳の有るやうに見ゆる) Mon. (物語) <sup>1)</sup>たとえ才能も技能もない者であっても、その者を重んじて引き立ててやれば、それらを持っているよう見えて来る。<sup>1)</sup>出典をMon. としているが天草版金句集, p. 524にも見える。

We can also find three entries that include the word “toku” in the dictionary (both the original and modern versions), although the editors of the 1980 version did not include these under the entry for “toku”:

1. 徳用Tocuyô: ある有益な物事から生ずる有用性 (Vtilidad [=Utilidad])
2. 精徳Xeitocu: 草とか薬とかなどの力、あるいは、効力 (força ou virtude)
3. 厚德Côtocu: 厚い徳。大きな利得 (Grandes proveitos)

Furthermore, another entry includes the word “toku” in its explanation, but the word is not included in the entry title:

功Cô: 修練、習熟。[Ien, I, gacumonno côuo tcumu. (善、または学文の功をむ) 善徳 (virtude; 善Ienの訳語として) や学問について、大いに習熟している]

(Regarding some key expressions, I have added the original Portuguese terms with parenthesis and underlines.)

the Japanese word “*toku*” was not an important concept for the moral worldview of the Japanese general public, and accordingly, for missionaries to Christianise such Japanese people by appealing to their worldview. Accordingly, they did not make a correspondence between “*virtus*” and “*toku*”. This is a clear contrast with the contemporary Japanese word of “*toku*”, which is dominantly used as the translation for “*aretē*” and “*virtue*”.

### 3. From the mid-17th to the mid-19th centuries: Acceptance of the neo-Confucian notion of virtue

In 1603, the Tokugawa shogunate ushered in the Edo era. For the preceding 400 years, Japan had been in a state of civil war, and there had been no stable, centralised state capable of unifying the whole country. The Tokugawa shogunate introduced neo-Confucianism as a moral code to stably govern the nation.<sup>26</sup> In particular, under the fifth shogun, Tsunayoshi Tokugawa (徳川綱吉; 1646–1709), who sought the ideas to govern the country and benefit the people (經世済民), neo-Confucianism was systematically introduced and established as the sociomoral norm as well as an academic discipline. Neo-Confucianism came to occupy the position of the primary philosophical and ethical theory in Japan until modern times.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, neo-Confucian moral doctrine spread among the ruling class (the samurai class) through both theoretical and moral education. After the subsequent separation of Confucianism and Buddhism, neo-Confucianism became the sociomoral foundation of the shogunate’s feudalism.

It should be true that the introduction of neo-Confucianism enriched Japanese philosophy in the Edo era. One of the leading scholars who introduced neo-Confucianism in Japan was Seika Fujiwara (藤原惺窩; 1561–1619). He shifted the status of Confucianism from a supplementary role for understanding Zen Buddhism to a single theory independent from Buddhism, emphasising the contrast between Confucianism as a philosophy for the present life and Buddhism as a philosophy for the afterlife. Razan

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<sup>26</sup> “Confucianism reached its greatest influence in Japan after 1600. ... Tokugawa shoguns accepted this [=Neo-Confucian philosophy of Zhu Xi] as the model for their state, for it promised stability and answered the need for a worldview that would promote order for the society” (Hoobler and Hoobler, *Confucianism, the third edition*, 73–74).

<sup>27</sup> “Confucian philosophy in Japan underwent only minor changes until its second wave in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries after which it experienced major transformations as it became Japan’s dominant philosophical movement until the radical changes brought by the modern period” (Kasulis, “Japanese Philosophy”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford: Stanford University, 2019).

Hayashi (林羅山; 1583–1657) followed the project of Fujiwara and realised that “neo-Confucianism was first fully accepted in Japan”.<sup>28</sup> In response to such neo-Confucian movement, many schools of Japanese philosophy developed.<sup>29</sup> For example, a Confucian Protestant position, Kogaku school (古学派), emerged and advocated that they should return to the interpretations of the classics, such as the *Analects of Confucius*. This academic debate led to a further development of the Japanised neo-Confucian notion of virtue. For example, Jinsai Ito (伊藤仁斎; 1627–1705) argued that the essence of neo-Confucian virtue lies in becoming a moral agent from the perspective of ordinary people, whereas Sorai Ogyu (荻生徂徠; 1666–1728) argued that virtue is the various roles that individuals should fulfil for the sake of governing the country.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, some scholars, such as Ekiken Kaibara (貝原益軒; 1630–1714) and Baigan Ishida (石田梅岩; 1685–1744), wrote books and established schools to teach virtues to the lay people.

Since neo-Confucianism was introduced as a means of social control, it spread rapidly among the ruling class during the Edo period. However, the extent to which such neo-Confucian doctrines spread among the general population remains disputed. A Japanese historian, Sokichi Tsuda (津田左右吉; 1873–1961), repeatedly argues that the influence of neo-Confucianism was limited only to the ruling class and did not spread much among the general population during the Edo period.<sup>31</sup> However, recent studies portrayed a different figure. For example, scholars argued that, throughout the Edo period, neo-Confucianism came to influence every aspect of Edo culture, including institutions and literature.<sup>32</sup> An American historian, Tetsuo Najita (奈地田 哲夫; 1936–2021), argues that the Japanised neo-Confucianism did spread among the general population.<sup>33</sup> As Najita analysed in detail, many schools were established for the general public in the Edo era. One such school is Kaitokudo (懷徳堂), which was established in Osaka in 1724 for the education of townspeople and merchants. Following Najita’s analysis, Kaitokudo literally means a school “to reflect deeply into the meaning of virtue... [As] an academy devoted to the serious study of ‘virtue’, [...this school

<sup>28</sup> M. Saito, “Japanese neo-Confucianism”, in Y. Oshitani et al. (eds.), *The New Encyclopedia of Moral Education*, vol. I. (Tokyo: Gakubunsha, 2021), 214.

<sup>29</sup> J. Tucker, “Japanese Neo-Confucian”.

<sup>30</sup> Saito, “Japanese neo-Confucianism”, 218–219.

<sup>31</sup> Tsuda, *Chinese Thoughts and Japan* (Tokyo: Iwanami-shoten, 1938) and Tsuda, *National Thoughts in Japanese Literature* (Tokyo: Iwanami-shoten, 1969).

<sup>32</sup> P. Nosco (ed.), *Confucianism and Tokugawa Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1984).

<sup>33</sup> T. Najita, *Visions of Virtue in Tokugawa Japan: The Kaitokudō Merchant Academy in Osaka*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 60 f.

was] a proud and thriving educational institution of higher learning that was open to all classes”.<sup>34</sup> Thus, to the best of our knowledge, it is reasonable to consider that the Confucian notion of virtue spread not only to the ruling class but also to the Japanese general public since the mid-17th century.

#### 4. From the late-19th to the 20th centuries: Arrival of the Western notion of virtue

Implementing neo-Confucian moral codes, the Tokugawa shogunate developed a relatively stable society that lasted approximately 260 years. However, in 1867, such an Edo period came to an end, and the Meiji government, centred on the emperor, was established. Immediately after the opening of the country to the West, various Western academic disciplines began to be translated and introduced. Such enthusiasm extended beyond natural sciences and technologies to the fields of art and history, including those of ancient Greece.<sup>35</sup> Treatises on ancient Greek moral ideas were also translated into Japanese. Japanese authors also published books that examined the pros and cons of Plato’s, Aristotle’s, and Christian ideas on virtue and their applicability to the Japanese moral education. Among them, the Aristotelian notion of virtue and moral education gained a high reputation.<sup>36</sup>

The impact of Western culture divided Japanese people into two groups with different attitudes. On the one hand, faced with scientific, technological, and social advancements of the West, some Japanese people began to attribute the backwardness of Japanese society to the neo-Confucian values that grounded the feudal and oppressive society. They argued that Shintoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism were all harmful to the development of Japanese society. The Meiji government also wanted to reject Confucianism because, being incorporated into the Edo system, it was in conflict with the Western way of thinking.<sup>37</sup>

Such anti-Confucian sentiments were observed among the general pu-

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<sup>34</sup> Najita, *Visions of Virtue in Tokugawa Japan*, 2.

<sup>35</sup> Micael Lucken (*Le Japon grec: Culture et possession*, Paris: Gallimard, 2019, Chapter 1) examined a Philhellenism movement in the Japanese art community between 1895 and 1945, and classified their attitudes towards ancient Greek culture into three types, namely, imitative, competitive, and dialectic attitudes.

<sup>36</sup> K. Tachibana, “The Reception History of Aristotle’s Theory of Education in Japan”, in T. Kondo and K. Tachibana (eds.), *Aristotle in Japan: Reception, Interpretation and Application* (Oxford: Routledge, 2025a), Chapter 1, 13–29.

<sup>37</sup> K. Paramore, *Japanese Confucianism: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 141–147.

blic. Dr Erwin Bälz (1849–1913) was a physician who lectured on physiology and internal medicine at the Faculty of Medicine of the Imperial University of Tokyo from 1876 to 1902. In his diary entry dated 25 October 1876, the year he began his tenure, he described how the Japanese people perceived their past at that time:<sup>38</sup>

However—how strange it is—modern Japanese people do not want to know anything about their own past [presumably referring to the feudal system and the Confucian values that supported it]. On the contrary, educated people even feel ashamed of it. Some have told me outright, “No, everything was completely barbaric [exact words!]”, while others, when I asked them about Japanese history, firmly stated, “We have no history. Our history is just beginning now”.<sup>39</sup>

On the other hand, Conservatives argued that, despite the stark power disparity with the West, Japanese society must maintain values based on traditional religion to compete with Western powers. For example, while acknowledging the progress of Western thought, Shigeki Nishimura (西村茂樹: 1828–1902) sought to preserve traditional Confucian ideas. In his *Japanese Moral Theory*, Nishimura described the situation in Japan at the time as follows:

[In the Meiji era,] Confucianism was discarded, and a new mixed religion of Shinto and Confucianism was being established [...]. However, this religion could not be established in the end. Since the discarded Confucianism could not be resumed, educated people have lost their morality and become less united than ever. Moral decay is occurring in Japan. [...] Thus, our country has become special in morality all over the world in that we alone have lost the standard of morality [...] the standard of national morality has not been set [...].<sup>40</sup>

Nishimura sought to develop a moral theory that combined Confucia-

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<sup>38</sup> In the afterword, the translator describes the relationship between the author, Erwin Bälz, his son, Toku Bälz, and the translator (Bälz, *The Diary of Erwin Bälz*, translated by Ryutaro Suganuma, Tokyo: Iwanami-shoten, 1979, Volume II, 425–429). According to this, the translator was provided the diary by Tok, but the German edition was first published (Bälz & Bälz (eds.) 1930). However, the edition was only an abridged version that was about one-third of the original. A Japanese translation was published in 1939. However, this was during the “times when there were too many things that could not be published”. So, it was subject to military censorship and was not the complete edition. The complete edition was published in Japan in 1979 (Bälz, *The Diary of Erwin Bälz*). Since the diary entry quoted here (25 Oct 1876) is omitted in the German edition, this quote is based on my English translation from the Japanese version.

<sup>39</sup> Bälz, *The Diary of Erwin Bälz*, Volume 1, 47.

<sup>40</sup> Nishimura, *A Japanese Moral Theory*. (Tokyo: Kinji Nishimura, 1887), 104.

nism and Western moral theories.<sup>41</sup> This endeavour can be observed in his final work, *Lectures on Virtues, Ten Volumes* (『徳学講義』), which was published until 1901, the year before his death. In the part entitled “The Names of Virtues (諸徳ノ名)” of Volume II, he classified the virtues of Confucianism and Western philosophy, and examined their relationship. This work was important for him because, as he mentioned, Confucius and Aristotle were two saints for him.<sup>42</sup>

After the opening of Japan in the Meiji period, Confucianism, Buddhism, Shintoism, and Western ideas were combined in a disorderly manner, resulting in ideological confusion.<sup>43</sup> As is typical in Nishimura’s concern, such moral chaos concerning the nature of the Japanese concept of virtue manifested itself as a dispute in moral education.

However, in 1890, the Imperial Rescript on Education (教育勅語) was issued under the name of the Meiji Emperor. This became the cornerstone of the Japanese concept of virtue since the Meiji period. The Rescript listed the 9–12 virtues that the Japanese people should possess, such as loyalty and filial piety.<sup>44</sup>

From 1903 onwards, the Ministry of Education began to compile national textbooks. In the first edition of the moral education textbooks (1904–1909), Western values, such as freedom, were emphasised to some extent. However, the second edition (1910–1917) placed greater emphasis on Confucian virtues—such as benevolence, righteousness, loyalty, and filial piety—with the aim of cultivating people who loved and respected the emperor and their country. For example, the story of Kohei Kiguchi (木口小平; 1872–1894) was portrayed differently across editions. Kiguchi was a soldier in the Imperial Japanese Army who died in the First Sino-Japanese War. As a bugler, he was said to have never let go of his bugle even in death. In the first edition, it was a story about courage, whereas in the second edition, it became a story of the virtues of loyalty to the emperor (忠君), love of country (愛国), and righteousness (義勇).

In the third edition (1918–1933), Western values were emphasised again in response to the democratic atmosphere in Japan (大正デモクラシー; Taisho Democracy). However, as the war intensified, the fourth and fifth editions (1939–1940; 1941–1945) promoted patriotism, loyalty, filial piety, and

<sup>41</sup> K. Tachibana, “Shigeki Nishimura and His Moral Philosophy in Late 19th Century Imperial Japan”. *Journal of East Asian Philosophy* (2025b).

<sup>42</sup> Tachibana, “A Forgotten Descendant of Aristotle’s Virtue Ethics: Shigeki Nishimura and the Unity of Far-Eastern and Western Virtues” [in preparation].

<sup>43</sup> M. Maruyama, *Thoughts in Japan* (Tokyo: Iwanami-shoten, 1961).

<sup>44</sup> The number of virtues can vary, depending on the interpretation of the Rescript.

self-sacrifice as the servant people of the emperor.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, imperialistic Confucianism was used to justify the war.<sup>46</sup> Under such circumstances, in moral education classes, children were taught a self-sacrificing moral code, which led many young people to be sent to the hopeless battlefield.

After the Meiji Restoration, Western ethical ideas were translated and introduced to Japanese society. Along with this, the Japanese concept of “virtue” also came to be understood in a Western manner, influenced by the growing disenchantment with Confucianism. These trends can be observed in the early period of the Meiji era as well as in the first and third editions of the national textbook on moral education. However, under the influence of militarisation and imperialism, a highly nationalised neo-Confucian view on virtue finally became dominant in the society, which can be vividly observed in the fourth and fifth editions of the textbooks.

## 5. From the mid-20th century to present: Contemporary Japanese concept of virtue

Following the unconditional surrender in 1945, Imperial moral education was abolished under the control of the GHQ because the GHQ considered moral education to be the source of Japan’s extremely Confucian militarism. In 1947, the Basic Act on Education was enacted. Article 1 states that the final end of post-war Japanese education is “the perfection of character (人格の完成)”. Although the Act was substantially revised in 2006, Article 1 maintains this phrase. This article was drafted by Kotaro Tanaka (田中耕太郎; 1890–1974), a legal scholar. As a devout Catholic, he argued that a perfect character is “a human being created by God as He intended (神がかくあるべきものとして創造したところの人間)”.<sup>47</sup> Since Tanaka sympathised with character education, he believed that such a perfect person is an ethical individual who possesses a set of virtues that can include but not be limited to Confucian virtues.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Y. Uehata, “Moral Education in Pre-war Japan”, in M. Ogasawara, et al. (eds.). *The Possibility of Moral Education* (Tokyo: Hukumura-shoten, 2012), 242–251; R. Yanagizawa, *Moral Education for the Zest for Living* (Tokyo: Keio University Press, 2012), and S. Yukiyasu, “Moral Education during Taisho and early Showa Periods”, in Y. Oshitani et al. (eds.). *The New Encyclopedia of Moral Education, vol I*. (Tokyo: Gakubunsha, 2021), 17–24.

<sup>46</sup> S. O’Dwyer, “Japanese Confucianism and War”, *Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture*, 38 (2022): 15–41

<sup>47</sup> Tanaka, *Theory of Basic Act on Education* (Tokyo: Yuhikaku, 1961), 79.

<sup>48</sup> K. Tachibana, “Virtues and the Aim of Japanese Character Education”, in John Chi-Kin Lee and Kerry Kennedy (eds.). *Routledge International Handbook of Life and Values Education in Asia* (Oxford: Routledge, 2024), Chapter 40, 370–379.

Although the Basic Act was enacted, it did not refer to moral education due to the above mentioned policy of the GHQ. Indeed, following the GHQ's order, post-war Japanese education did not have a subject for moral education. It fostered moral values throughout the whole school curriculum. Thus, Japan once again found itself in a morally rootless situation. Although the moral code of Imperial Japan had collapsed, no alternative foundation could be found. Against this background, on the one hand, the need for moral education was repeatedly claimed by various intellectuals and politicians; on the other hand, strong criticism arose against such claims due to the fear of returning to the pre-war moral education.

However, in 1958, moral education was established as a special class named Moral Hour (道徳の時間). Eijiro Inatomi (稲富栄次郎; 1897–1975), a philosopher of education specialising in ancient Greek philosophy, played a major role in this. He reflected on the moral situation at the time as follows:

The foundation of moral education in Japan cannot be found in religion, nor can it be found in pure theoretical ethics. If we cannot rely on faith or academic theories, where should we seek the foundation of morality?<sup>49</sup>

He believed that the “perfection of character” in Article 1 represents the final goal of the post-war Japanese moral education. He then considered the perfect character to be a fully virtuous person. Based on Aristotle's distinction between intellectual and moral virtues, Inatomi argued that for the education of such virtues, we need two kinds of education. On the one hand, it is necessary to cultivate intellectual virtues throughout the whole school curriculum. On the other hand, ethical virtues must be taught in special moral education classes. Based on this dual-process structure argument, moral education was implemented as a special class in primary and middle schools in 1958. Although the status of moral education was updated from a special class to a special subject in 2015, the dual-process structure remains unchanged. In this sense, the Japanese post-war moral education has been considered to be a social implementation of Aristotle's theory of virtue in some respects.<sup>50</sup>

However, such acceptance and implementation of the Western concept of virtues does not imply that the Western way of understanding the Japanese concept of virtue will become dominant in Japan. Let us examine this from four perspectives: the popularity of the notion of virtue, the translators' com-

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<sup>49</sup> E. Inatomi, *Japanese Moral Education*. Reprinted in *The Works of Eijiro Inatomi*. Vol. 9 (Tokyo: Gakusha, 1966), 420.

<sup>50</sup> K. Tachibana, “Virtue Ethics Embedded: Aristotelianism in the post-war Japanese Moral Education”, *Journal of Moral Education*, 54(3), 2024b: 356-373.

ments on Aristotle's notion of virtue, the list of virtues taught in schools, and public perception of the concept of virtue.

### 5.1. *Popularity of the notion of virtue*<sup>51</sup>

Some Japanese historians and philosophers have witnessed that people become unfamiliar with the concept of virtue in post-war Japanese society. Makoto Kurozumi, a scholar of Japanese intellectual history, says “[in modern times,] virtue seems to have been forgotten (徳はもう忘れられているようだ)” and “the word ‘virtue’ itself has been lost and has become a ‘blank’ (徳という語自体、もう失われて〈空白〉になっている)”.<sup>52</sup> In 1993, the Japan Society for Ethics had a symposium at its annual conference, entitled *The Contemporary Significance of Virtue Ethics*. In this symposium, Hitoshi Nagai (永井均; 1951–), an analytic philosopher, said, “I believe that the English word ‘virtue’ and its equivalents in European languages are still used in their original contexts today. However, at least in contemporary Japanese, I rarely hear the word ‘toku’ used in this context [i.e., the context of virtue ethics]. I suspect that many young people are probably unaware that such a word even exists (英語の “virtue” やヨーロッパ語のそれにあたる言葉は現代でも実際に、そこで使われている言葉だと思いますが、少なくとも現在の日本語で「徳」などという言葉を目にする機会はめったにありません。たぶん多くの若い人はそんな言葉のあることも知らないだろうと考えます。)”.<sup>53</sup> Two panellists who responded to Nagai's comments in the symposium, Shigeru Kanzaki (神崎繁; 1952–2016) and Toshio Kuwako (桑子敏雄; 1951–), did not argue against Nagai's assumption, and another panellist, Motohiro Takashima (高島元洋; 1949–), agreed with Nagai in this respect.<sup>54</sup>

This situation is not unique to modern Japan. In his “Schopenhauer as Educator” (1874), Nietzsche described virtue as follows: “Virtue is a word that prevents both teachers and students from thinking any further, a word that people laugh at because it is outdated—and if they do not laugh, it is a bad thing, because then they are being hypocritical (und Tugend ist ein Wort, bei dem Lehrer und Schüler sich nichts mehr denken können, ein altmodisches Wort, über das man lächelt – und schlimm, wenn man nicht

<sup>51</sup> This subsection is based on K. Tachibana, “On Contemporary Virtue Ethics: Its Theory, Beginning in Japan, and Educational Issues”, *Philcul*, 6(2): 82–110.

<sup>52</sup> Kurozumi, “What is Virtue for humans?”, 29–30.

<sup>53</sup> *Contemporary Significance of Virtue Ethics*, ed. by Japan Society for Ethics (Tokyo: Keio-tushin, 1994), 150.

<sup>54</sup> *Contemporary Significance of Virtue Ethics*, 169–175.

lächelt, denn dann wird man heucheln.)”.<sup>55</sup> Dorothea Frede also says that: “As everyone who ever taught a course in ancient philosophy to first-year students will know, it is hard work to make them even understand what the Greeks meant by ‘virtue’. Nothing attests better to that fact than the replacement of ‘virtue’ by ‘excellence’ in updated versions of Ross’ translation of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*”.<sup>56</sup>

It can be inferred that, in the mid-1990s, the word “virtue” became unfamiliar to Japanese people, including professional philosophers. The 1993 symposium can be regarded as the earliest attempt to formally introduce the Western concept of “virtue” and the term “virtue ethics” into the contemporary philosophy circle in Japan.<sup>57</sup>

## 5.2. Translators’ comments on Aristotle’s notion of virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*

The Japanese translation of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* provides a clue from a different perspective on the trajectory of the Japanese concept of virtue. The first Japanese version of *Nicomachean Ethics* was a retranslation from English in 1908.<sup>58</sup> The English translation cited for this Japanese version is probably the one translated by Robert Williams in 1869.<sup>59</sup> In this Japanese translation, the English word “virtue” is translated as “toku”; however, no explanation is provided for this word.

The situation changed when Japanese translations directly from the (original) Greek texts began to appear. The first Japanese translation in this sense

<sup>55</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: kritische Studienausgabe. Bd. 1 Die Geburt der Tragödie; Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen 1-4; Nachgelassene Schriften 1870–1873* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), s. 345 [UM III: 2].

<sup>56</sup> Frede, “The Historic Decline of Virtue Ethics”, 126. The replacement in question is the so-called Oxford Translation edited by Jonathan Barnes (1984). However, Julia Annas (1992, p. 124) refers to a different reason for this replacement, saying that they adopted the word “excellence” because the word “virtue” can be applied only to human moral faculty.

<sup>57</sup> The reason I am limiting my discussion here to “as contemporary philosophy circle” is that the word ‘virtue’ itself has been used in interpretive studies of ancient Greek philosophy, Christianity, and Confucianism. For example, in the 1960s, Michitaro Tanaka (田中美知太郎; 1902–1985), a philosopher of ancient Greek philosophy, examined the contrast between the Kantian ethics and the ethics of virtue, and raised the question, saying that “how far can other ethics go without the ethics of virtue? (徳の倫理なしに、他の倫理がどこまでやって行けるのか)” (Tanaka, *Ethics of Virtue and Ethics of Law*, 325).

<sup>58</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Sakunoshin Motoda and Masao Takahashi (Tokyo: Keiseisha 1908).

<sup>59</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle*. Newly Translated into English by Robert Williams (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1869).

was published in 1938 by Saburo Takada (高田三郎; 1902–1994).<sup>60</sup> In this translation, Takada used both “*toku* (徳)” and “*takuetsusei* (優秀性)”, which approximately means “excellence”, as words for *aretē*. In a footnote, he explains that the meaning of “*aretē*” is “excellence or perfection (優秀性・完全性)”. He also notes that, since there are ethical and intellectual forms of virtue in Aristotle, it should be translated as excellence. However, he added, “although ‘*toku*’ is usually understood exclusively in the ethical sense in Japanese, I dare to adopt this word as the Japanese translation of virtue (徳といへば倫理的なそれに限られるのが我々の通念であるが、敢えてさう譯しておく)”.<sup>61</sup> The same note is also retained in the paperback edition published in 1971.<sup>62</sup>

The next Japanese translation from the Greek texts is made by Shinro Kato (加藤信朗; 1926–). He adopts an unusual translation “*kiryo* (器量)” and explains in the note that “this word has traditionally been translated as ‘*toku*’”, but he adopts “*kiryo*” because “the etymological meaning of *aretē* is not necessarily limited to such a moral meaning (道徳的な意義はこの語の字義には必然的には含意されない)”.<sup>63</sup>

The third and fourth translations were published in 2002 and 2014, respectively. Although both adopt “*toku*” as the translation, neither explains this choice or meaning in the notes or commentary.<sup>64</sup> The fifth and most recent translation, which was published in 2015 by Kunio Watanabe (渡辺邦夫; 1954–) and Koji Tachibana (立花幸司; 1979–), also adopts “*toku*” by adding “*aretē*” in katakana. This translation explains in a note that “*aretē* is a word that generally means excellence in things and, accordingly, when referring to human excellence, it can be roughly translated as ‘*toku*’ (アレテは一般にものごとの卓越性を意味する言葉で、人としてのアレテならば「徳」のようにおおよそ訳せる)”.<sup>65</sup>

These translations and their notes suggest to us a change in translators’ perception of the Japanese word “*toku*”. First of all, Japanese scholars of ancient

<sup>60</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Saburo Takada (Tokyo: Kawade-shobo, 1938).

<sup>61</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Saburo Takada (Tokyo: Kawade-shobo, 1938), 570.

<sup>62</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Saburo Takada (Tokyo: Iwanami-shoten, 1971), 252.

<sup>63</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Shinro Kato (Tokyo: Iwanami-shoten, 1973), 366, n. 4.

<sup>64</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Ilgong Park. (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2002); Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Shigeru Kanzaki (Tokyo: Iwanami-shoten, 2014).

<sup>65</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Kunio Watanabe and Koji Tachibana (Tokyo: Kobunsha, 2015), 39, n. 4.

Greek philosophy have constantly had a correct understanding of the ancient Greek notion of *aretē*, that is, the meaning of this word is not limited to the moral realm, but also includes intellectual and other aspects. Takada and Kato pointed out that the Japanese word “*toku*” strongly has moral connotations.<sup>66</sup> What is interesting here is that Takada dared to choose this word, while Kato opted for a different word. As translators, they were bound to consider what Japanese readers imagine when they read this word. Since Takada’s translation was published in 1938, it is likely that, for Takada, the word “*toku*” delivers strongly nationalised Confucian connotations. So, he had to say he *dared to* adopt “*toku*”. Even in the 1970s, when Kato’s translation and Takada’s paperback edition were published, such perceptions may have lasted. Conversely, in the 21st century, no particular explanation is given for translating it as “*toku*”. This suggests that the Japanese word “*toku*” has lost its nationalistic Confucian connotation. Furthermore, in the note by Watanabe and Tachibana, the Japanese word “*toku*” seems to cover non-moral aspects of excellence.<sup>67</sup> Examining such transitions in translations may lead us to assume that the meaning of the Japanese word “*virtue*” has shifted from its Confucian moral connotations to human excellence in general.

### 5.3. List of virtues taught in schools<sup>68</sup>

In 1890, the Meiji government published the Imperial Rescript on Education, which served as the foundation of moral education in the Empire of Japan until 1945. The Rescript lists nine virtues, including loyalty, filial devotion, patriotism, and self-sacrifice (Table 1). Compared to such patriotic moral education, we can see a certain shift of virtues from feudalistic to liberal, which provides twenty-two virtues to be taught in school (Table 2).

Such a shift, however, does not imply that current Japanese character education has been totally Westernised; significant differences remain between Japanese and so-called Western notions of virtue. In particular, we should not overlook the fact that the current Course of Study in Japanese character education retains some feudalistic and patriotic virtues, such as C5, C7 and C8. Even if the aim of education in the Act has been Westernised, the virtues that are nurtured to realise this aim may not be solely Western values. It remains an open question whether such a mixture of virtues can achieve the aim of education, which is declared in the Basic Act.

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<sup>66</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Saburo Takada (1938); Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Shinro Kato (1973).

<sup>67</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Kunio Watanabe and Koji Tachibana (Tokyo: Kobunsha, 2015).

<sup>68</sup> This subsection is extracted with alternations from Tachibana (2024a).

**Table 1. Nine virtues in the Imperial Rescript on Education (1890)**

1. Loyalty (忠君)
2. Filial devotion (孝行)
3. Fidelity (信義)
4. Non-impoliteness (無礼でないこと)
5. Studying (修学)
6. Serving the public (公共奉仕)
7. Patriotism (愛国心)
8. Self-sacrifice (自己犠牲)
9. Local patriotism (郷土愛)

**Table 2. Twenty-two virtues to be taught in school<sup>69</sup>**

- A: Virtues related to the relationship with oneself
1. Independence, autonomy, freedom and responsibility
  2. Temperance
  3. Ambition
  4. Hope, courage, self-denial and strong will
  5. Searching for truth and creation
- B: Virtues related to the relationship with other individuals
1. Compassion and gratitude
  2. Politeness
  3. Friendship and trust
  4. Mutual understanding and broad-mindedness
- C: Virtues related to the relationship with the group and society
1. Spirit of law observance and spirit of public morality
  2. Fairness, equity and social justice
  3. Social participation and public spirit
  4. Labouring
  5. Family love and the repletion of home life
  6. Better school life and repletion of group life
  7. Respect for local tradition and culture, and love for hometown
  8. Respect for national tradition and culture, and love for the nation
  9. International understanding and international contribution
- D: Virtues related to the relationship with life, nature and lofty things
1. Dignity of life
  2. Nature conservation
  3. Inspiration and awe-inspiring
  4. Joy of living better

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<sup>69</sup> MEXT, The designated “Course of Study” for Elementary Schools: Special Subject, Morality (2017).

#### 5.4. Public perception of the Japanese concept of virtue<sup>70</sup>

It becomes clear that the current concept of virtue in Japan is an amalgam of Buddhist, Confucian, and Western elements that have been interwoven throughout history. An empirical study supports this. In 2024, nearly 271 Japanese experts in philosophy, ethics, and education, along with 1,000 Japanese people with no such expertise, were asked to answer the following five questions concerning the word “toku (virtue)”: (1) How often do you hear or see the word “toku”? (2) How often do you use the word “toku”? (3) Do you have a positive or negative impression of the word “toku”? (4) What words come to mind when you think of “virtue”? (5) From a list of 129 virtues collected from Western philosophy, Christianity, positive psychology, Confucianism, Buddhism, and the Japanese Course of Study, which ones do you consider important, and which ones do you not understand well?

The results are as follows: (1) the general public had a lower frequency of both exposure to and (2) use of “toku”, compared with those of experts. However, regardless of the general public or experts, (3) very few people had a negative impression towards “toku”. (4) While the general public tended to associate Buddhist terms with “toku”, experts tended to associate terms derived from Western philosophy. Finally, (5) while the public placed importance on Buddhist virtues such as gratitude, experts placed importance on Western virtues, such as independence, as well as Buddhist virtues; however, both groups had a low understanding of Confucian virtues. This study shows that modern Japanese people do not retain the pre-war image of the Japanese concept of virtue “toku”. They mainly understand this notion from Buddhist perspectives and belittle many Confucian virtues. Those who have studied philosophy, ethics, and education tend to emphasise Western virtues. This aligns with the evolution of virtue in Japan as demonstrated in this paper.

#### Conclusion

Tetsuro Watsuji (和辻哲郎; 1889–1960), one of the leading Japanese philosophers, characterises Japanese culture as the culture of “layers (重層性)”, using the German word “*nebeneinander*”.<sup>71</sup> He argues that, when new cultures overcome old ones, the old cultures are not forgotten but instead coexist in layers. In this sense, this study shows that the Japanese concept of virtue has its own layers.

<sup>70</sup> This subsection is based on Tachibana & Nakazawa (2024).

<sup>71</sup> T. Watsuji, Japanese Spirit. *Eastern Thoughts*. September (1934).

The historical trajectory of the Japanese concept of virtue reveals four features of this concept. First, the prototype of the Japanese concept of virtue is Buddhist rather than Confucian. Second, Confucian colouration became distinct after the mid-17th century, reaching its peak in the first half of the 20th century in the form of a Japanised, nationalistic, neo-Confucian interpretation of virtue. Third, the Western perspectives on virtue were first recognised in the late 19th century. Among these Western thinkers, Aristotle's notion of virtue was warmly welcomed by Japanese intellectuals because of its liberal character. Fourth, since the late 20th century, the excessive influence of Confucian perspectives has gradually declined, resulting in the Japanese concept of virtue becoming an amalgam of Buddhist, Confucian, and Western-Christian notions of virtue. This amalgam has been developed through the Basic Act on Education, the post-war moral education system, and the governmental education policy. A psychological survey suggests that such an amalgam is being inherited by the general public in Japan.

The historical change in the meaning of the Japanese concept of virtue, as presented in this paper, is not decisive. At the end, I will outline some avenues for further research, which also highlight the limitations of this paper.

Regarding the Introduction that describes the strategy of this paper, one might argue that we can investigate the Japanese concept of virtue without focusing on the word “徳 (toku)”. I agree with this because some individual virtues, such as “仁 (C; ren, J; jin)” and “礼 (C; li, J; rei)”, have been considered important in Japanese society.<sup>72</sup> Just as the movement of the solar system appears different depending on the observer's perspective, so does virtue vary depending on the aspect of the notion that is focused on. Therefore, it is worth considering the possibility that the general public embraced various virtues not under the concept of toku. Although such research may not be easy to conduct, future research will fill in the missing details and provide different aspects of this notion that are concealed from the perspective presented in this paper.

Regarding Section 2, my analysis of the moral worldview that the general public held in early 17th-century Japan can be revised or overcome. I strategically presuppose that missionary dictionaries are reliable sources for inferring the worldview. However, if MacIntyre and Frede are correct, the value of virtue declined in Western society by the end of the 16th century.<sup>73</sup> If such a deterioration in the value of virtue influenced the perception of vir-

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<sup>72</sup> Y. Yasumaru, *Modernisation and Popular Thoughts in Japan* (Tokyo: Heibonsha 1999). See also S. Kanzaki, “Can We Translate Thinking? On the Translated Word ‘Kou-fuku’”. Translated by Noburu Notomi. *Tetsugaku*, 2: 9–28.

<sup>73</sup> MacIntyre, *Japanese Translation of After Virtue*, and Frede, “The Historic Decline of Virtue Ethics”.

tue among missionaries, they might not have been so interested in explaining the Western concept of virtue or finding a Japanese equivalent. In this case, the dictionaries would not be reliable in this respect, and, accordingly, examining such dictionaries would not clarify the moral worldview of Japanese laypeople or how they used the word “*toku*”.<sup>74</sup>

In relation to Sections 1, 2 and 3, it would be worthwhile to examine the so-called representative works of the Japanese people at that time. However, such works were typically created by and for intellectuals. Accordingly, they may not reflect how ordinary people understood the word. A more fruitful approach would be to examine the collections of stories told by Japanese religious figures to the general public, which may provide a similar perspective to the missionaries examined in this paper.

In relation to Sections 2 and 3, I did not discuss the history of Christian studies in Japan. As in the West, we can observe a certain bond between Christian studies and the studies on ancient Greek philosophy in Japanese academia. For example, Dr Sakunoshin Motoda, who was one of the translators of the first Japanese translation of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (published in 1908), was a Christian and became the first Japanese bishop of the Anglican Church. The publisher of the translation was also the first interdenominational Protestant publishing house in Japan, which was established in 1883. Japanese translations of the Bible may also provide us with some insights about how Japanese Christians have translated “*virtus*” and “*aretē*” into Japanese. The latest Japanese Catholic dictionary has the entry for “*toku*” and explains this concept in the context of Christianity.<sup>75</sup> Although it seems that these words were translated as “*toku*” from the very beginning, as far as I know, the backgrounds remain uncertain.

These and other further studies will reveal the historical trajectory of the Japanese concept of virtue and the extent to which factors, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Western philosophy, and Christianity, and to what extent, have influenced this.

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<sup>74</sup> Related to this, investigating missionaries’ “*virtus*” may not help us to fully understand the Western influence on the Japanese concept of virtue because the Christian notion of “*virtus*” is not fully equal to its ancient Greek correspondence “*aretē*”. I acknowledge the importance of this point following a comment presented by Prof. Mário Santiago de Carvalho.

<sup>75</sup> H. Ogino & Yoshiko Takano, “*Virtue*”, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol III (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 2010), 1303–1306.

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