
*Responding to the
Great Learning:
Part I*

Responding to the Great Learning

*There are viable measures for saving the country from its contemporary predicament. These measures never circulated in antiquity or contemporary times, in either Japan or China. Even now, their realization depends upon having the right person in government. Once that person appears, they must be implemented. Until then, they should remain secret, not transmitted.*¹

¹ This translation is based on the text in the *Banzan zenshū* (*Complete Works of Kumazawa Banzan*), vol. 3, pp. 233–282, entitled, *Daigaku wakumon chikoku heitenka no bekkkan*, or, in translation, *Responding to the Great Learning: Another Volume on Governing the Realm and Bringing Peace to All below Heaven*. Other versions of the text, including digitized woodblock editions and manuscripts, have also been referenced.

I The Heaven-Decreed Duty of the People's Ruler

Someone asked, “What is the heaven-decreed duty¹ of the people's ruler?²”

Banzan replied, “The heaven-decreed duty of the people's ruler is to administer compassionate government³ with a compassionate mind⁴ as the father and mother of the people.⁵ For the ruler of a single provincial domain,⁶

¹ For more on “the heavenly-decreed duty” (*tenshoku*), see *Mencius*, 5B/12, p. 40. *Xunzi*, “Essay on Heaven,” section 2. Xunzi (third century BCE), was one of the major Confucian thinkers of ancient China. He is best known for his assertion, contrary to Mencius, that human nature is originally bad. Because of that assessment, Xunzi was often viewed as a heterodox thinker within the Confucian fold.

² “The people's ruler” (*jinkun*) alludes to the *Great Learning*, section 7, which states “the people's ruler abides in compassion.” Also, *Mencius*, 1A/6, p. 2.

³ *Mencius*, 1A/5, p. 2. 1B/11,12, p. 8. 2A/1, p. 10. 3A/3, p. 19. 4A/1, p. 26. 4A/15, p. 28. Compassionate government (C: *renzhen*; J: *jinsei*) is the signature political notion in the *Mencius*. Confucius did not address it, though he often spoke of “compassion” (*ren*) and “government” (*zheng*). Mencius combined the words as a compound. Thereafter, “compassionate government” became one of the most distinctively Confucian political terms in East Asian history.

⁴ Banzan's reference to “a compassionate mind” (*jinshin*) alludes to *Mencius*, 4A/1, p. 26.

⁵ *Book of History (Shujing)*, “Books of Zhou,” “The Great Declaration” (*Tai shi*). “Heaven and earth are the father and mother of the ten thousand things. People are the most spiritual beings of the ten thousand things. The most brightly intelligent of them is elevated as their ruler, and he undertakes his work as ‘the father and mother of the people’.” Also, “The Great Plan” (*Hong fa*): “The son of heaven is the father and mother of the people, and so becomes the king of the realm below heaven.”

⁶ Banzan refers to political units via a Confucian term – C: *guo*; J: *koku* or *kuni* – not infrequently translated as “state.” In Japanese history, however, *kuni* was typically understood as an imperial province. Banzan does not refer to daimyō domains, or *han*, as such, but nevertheless he is addressing domain government when referring to *kuni*. In the Tokugawa period, both references were used in discussing the operative units of political authority and practice. Banzan's usage might indicate his tendency to privilege

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heaven decrees⁷ that he serve as the father and mother of the people of that domain. For the ruler of the realm below heaven, heaven decrees that he serve as the father and mother of the realm below heaven. It is the same for those ordered to perform various tasks for the people's ruler.

“[Because the ruler's duties might be neglected] heaven's decrees are not, therefore, granted for eternity.⁸ It is said that when a ruler gains the minds and hearts of the multitudes, he gains the realm. When he loses the minds and hearts of the multitudes, he loses the realm.⁹ The minds and hearts of the multitudes of people cleave to compassion and recoil from what betrays compassion. When a ruler tends to his heaven-assigned tasks, he retains the decree of heaven. When a ruler abandons his heaven-assigned tasks, he loses the decree of heaven. The decree of heaven always favors compassion and goodness. This is the unchanging nature of the decree of heaven which is otherwise not constant, but instead, changeable.

“Even if the people's ruler has a compassionate mind and heart, if he cannot administer compassionate government then his rule is ‘merely good.’¹⁰ Making compassionate government a reality comes down to getting the right people in government. If a ruler appoints wise men to high-ranking positions, has those with inborn talents¹¹ for governing take responsibility

the imperial regime and its nomenclature for political geography, but it would be naïve to imagine that he did not have domains in mind first and foremost. To capture these nuances, *kuni* is here translated as provincial domains, and occasionally, more simply as domains.

⁷ The notion “the decree of heaven” or “heaven decrees” (C: *tianming*; J: *tenmei*) first appears in the *Shujing* (*Book of History*), and there some twenty-six times, referring to the commands of a providential heaven, presiding over the cosmos and ensuring the ethical goodness of the political world. Most pointedly, the decree of heaven was the directing force, ordering and sanctioning the overthrow of one dynastic line by another. According to the *tianming* narrative, when one dynasty forsook its virtue and thus its legitimacy, heaven recognized a ruling family line of virtue and decreed that it overthrow the one that had abandoned virtue and lost its legitimacy to rule. Thereafter, the new line would rule, with heaven's decree, but only if it maintained virtue (*toku*) as evident in its concern for the welfare of the people.

⁸ *Shujing*, “Announcement to the Prince of Kang,” 15, “The king said, ‘... The decree [of heaven] is not constant [*bu yu chang*].’”

⁹ *Great Learning*, section 13. Also, *Mencius* 4A/9.

¹⁰ *Mencius*, 4A/1, p. 26. “Mencius said, ‘The way of Yao and Shun, if not enacted with compassionate government, cannot peacefully govern the realm below heaven. ... Therefore, it is said, ‘Merely being good is not sufficient to govern.’”

¹¹ In his *Brief Commentary on the Analects* (*Rongo shōkai*), Banzan explains that one who has inborn talents for governing the realm below heaven and the provinces within it must also be educated and ethical. The notion of “inborn talents” (*honsai*), could be literally translated as “basic talents” or “fundamental talents,” but given Banzan's appreciation for

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for administering domains, and decrees that capable people¹² administer other tasks, then his compassionate mind would become all-encompassing and compassionate government would be fully realized.”

Someone asked, “What does ‘placing wise men in high positions’ involve?”

Banzan replied, “The ruler is the very strength of the realm below heaven. However, even in strength he can go to excess. Even the high-flying dragon encounters regrets¹³ and misfortune. The ruler therefore should temper his strength with gentleness. He should do this by appointing for himself an official tutor and guardian.¹⁴ He should also establish an office for remonstrance. He should additionally favor virtue, advance literary culture and the martial arts, and elevate people of refined and cultured sensibilities to supervise samurai officials and administrators. That is what placing wise men in high positions involves.”

Someone asked, “What does it mean to have ‘inborn talents’ for governing?”

Banzan replied, “While there are various talents such as wisdom and cleverness, the talent for administering provincial domains and the realm below heaven is what I call an ‘inborn talent.’ Confucius remarked that people who have [this kind of] talent are rare.¹⁵ Because they are rare, from olden times rulers who embodied the way had such people brought into service regardless of whether they were secondary retainers, commoners, or even rustics. In antiquity, Yi Yin was elevated from the laborers in the farm fields of the prince of Xin.¹⁶ Fu Yue was elevated from the ranks of bricklayers building walls.¹⁷

“From past times, when the office of prime minister was established, people with such a talent for governing were promptly elevated, without regard to whether they were high-born or of the lowest station. Their offices and stipends were not hereditary. Instead, stipends were restricted

Wang Yangming’s thinking about “innate knowledge” (C: *liangzhi*; J: *ryōchi*), and abilities that people possess without having learned them via books and reading, rendering *honsai* as “inborn talents” seems equally appropriate.

¹² Mencius, 2A/4, p. 12. ¹³ *Book of Changes*, “Qian,” section 7.

¹⁴ *Shujing*, Tai Jia, II:6. ¹⁵ *Analects*, 8/20, p. 15.

¹⁶ Mencius, 5A/7, p. 37. “Mencius said, ‘Yi Yin was a farmer working in the fields of the prince of Xin, but even so found happiness in the way of Yao and Shun.’”

¹⁷ Mencius, 6B/15, p. 50. “Mencius said, ‘Shun was called up to serve in governing even though he had been earlier working in the farm fields. Fu Yue was elevated to assist in government even though he had been previously working in construction.’”

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to the period of their time of service only. By providing stipends for ministerial service corresponding to tenure in office, the early rulers who followed the way ensured that for over one hundred generations the wise and talented would not be excluded from high office and their method of elevating those with talents would be appropriate to the circumstances of later ages as well.”

Someone asked, “I have heard of official stipends that are hereditary. What are stipends that are exclusive to one generation?”

Banzan replied, “Officials who have to manage vassals and fiefs [which they receive as hereditary compensation] end up spending all their energy doing so. That impairs their ability to serve as officials. This is especially true when ordinary people are appointed to offices with hereditary fiefs and, suddenly, find themselves in charge of many retainers and servants. They then devote their minds exclusively to managing their affairs and are not able to tend to their official duties, governing.

“Therefore, the prime minister’s salary of 100,000 *koku*¹⁸ should be paid in rice, wheat, gold, and silver. He should be allowed only as many servants and horses as are necessary for his personal livelihood and assistance. For his official duties, he should have lesser officials serving him just like they were his house retainers. Of his stipend of 100,000 *koku*, 10,000 *koku* should suffice for his family. He can use the remaining 90,000 *koku* to help relatives, friends, those in need, and to ensure the well-being of his descendants for years to come. When he becomes sick or elderly, he should resign his stipend and return to his family’s home. For those without a homeplace, lodging would be provided for their retirement.

“When senior officials receive hereditary fiefs of one hundred thousand *koku* which they then bequeath to their descendants, after ten relatives have inherited the original fief, the expense will have grown to 1 million *koku*. Because the shogunate does not have enough resources to continue to support this method of payment, it is impossible to select men from a large pool of talent. Instead, high officials have to be chosen from those already possessing high rank and office. Because such high-ranking people are few, it is difficult to find any with a basic talent for governing. Those whose aptitudes and virtues are not appropriate to

¹⁸ One *koku* equals 180 liters or 380 US pints, or five US bushels. Measured in terms of weight, 1 *koku* equals 150 kilograms, or approximately 330 US pounds. The *koku* was a standard unit of measure for rice income during the Tokugawa period.

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their official positions and yet continue to receive large stipends generation after generation will be abandoned by heaven. Consequently, few competent men will be found among their descendants.

“Therefore, in the past it was said that for the sake of elevating those who are worthy, a ruler should search among the commoners. Hence, the ruler must keep channels of communication open so that good advice from the realm below heaven might come forth. Even critical remarks must be taken into consideration. Without privileging his own brilliance and wisdom, the ruler should enjoy seeking the counsel of others. This should be a primary concern for the people's ruler who seeks to govern as the father and mother of his people.”

2 The Heaven-Decreed Duty of the People's Ministers

Someone asked, “What is the heaven-decreed duty of the people’s ministers?”

Banzan replied, “The heaven-decreed duty of a minister is to assist the ruler in implementing compassionate government. Some ministers will help guide the mind and heart of the ruler. Others will help him communicate and enact compassionate government. In doing so, ministers credit the ruler with all that is good, and take personal responsibility for any mistakes. Ministers should not covet authority and power for themselves but instead recognize those as belonging wholly to the ruler.

“The way of the minister is modeled on the way of earth which is gentle and yielding. However, the minister should not be excessively yielding, nor should he bend simply for the sake of gain. When a ruler forsakes goodness, his ministers should remonstrate with him. Doing so supplements the minister’s gentleness. From above, [the ruler in following] the way of heaven provides for everything below, while from below [the minister in following] the way of earth brings activity to things above. When above and below interact, their purpose penetrates everything. Such are the right principles informing proper relations between rulers and ministers.

¹ Banzan refers to ministers as *jinshin*, literally, “the people’s ministers,” much as he referred to the ruler as “the people’s ruler” (*jinkun*). In doing so, he is referring to ministers who help govern the people of the realm on behalf of the ruler yet do so for the sake of the welfare of the people. In using this term, Banzan alludes to the *Great Learning*, section 7, which states “the people’s minister abides in respect and reverence.” Also see, *Mencius* (7A/31).

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“It is said that when a ruler is obsessed with strength and a minister is given over to gentleness, the ruler will become haughty and arrogant and his ministers will fawn and flatter, thus bringing disorder to the principles informing right relations between rulers and ministers. A beclouded ruler might fail due to weakness, while a ruler who brilliantly scrutinizes and fastidiously pries into matters might harm the realm when quick decisions are necessary. Such ill-advised approaches to governing might affect the entire realm below heaven and ultimately lead it to ruin. Therefore, the ruler above reveres wisdom but not mere cleverness. A bright and wise ruler is lenient and broad-minded, while his subjects below enjoy the gentleness and harmony of his rule. It is thus said that the ruler in following the way of heaven, all-encompassing and all-embracing, finds his virtue expressed.”

Someone asked, “Can we know beforehand whether the realm below heaven will be well governed or fall into anarchy, persist or collapse into ruin, enjoy good fortune or suffer bad?”

Banzan replied, “There are ways of knowing these matters. When we consider examples from ancient and modern times, in China and Japan, we see that good government prevails when channels of communication are open. When those channels are obstructed, there will be upheaval. Slow-witted rulers and kings are not the ones who block channels of communication. Rather, it is rulers who rely on cleverness who obstruct channels of communication.

“For this reason, it should be noted, the *Book of Changes* positions *Li* (離) ☲ as the upper trigram of the hexagram, *Kui* 睽 (睽) ☱. Now as a trigram, *Li* typically signifies “fire” and “brightness.” However, only with the hexagram *Kui* does its meaning change to signify things that are deviant and contrary. When *yang* goes to an extreme, it signifies haughtiness. When firmness and strength go to an extreme, they express cruelty. When *Li*, brightness, is above, it represents clever scrutiny. Haughtiness, clever scrutiny, and cruelty are the most extreme nuances of *Kui*.

“The top trigram in *Kui*, which is *Li*, signifies fire proceeding upward. The lower trigram in *Kui* is *Dui* (兌) ☱, which indicates a swamp flowing downward. *Kui* thus symbolizes contrary and opposing channels of communication, and so a lack of empathy and understanding between superiors and inferiors. When superiors and inferiors do not empathize with and appreciate one another, the minds and hearts of the people below heaven become alienated. When the minds and hearts of the people below

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heaven are so alienated, that is tantamount to having no ruler. That is the origin of great upheaval in the realm.

“When a ruler on high relies solely on his own clever mind and despises the criticisms of the realm below heaven, he will eventually reject those who remonstrate, which in turn leads him down the path of upheaval. When a ruler executes ministers who remonstrate, he will bring upheaval and ruin to his realm. It has thus been said that while it is not in the best personal interests of a minister to speak honestly and directly to a ruler, doing so brings good fortune to the realm.

“In ancient China, the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) lost the realm below heaven because it made it a crime to criticize, thereby suppressing the severe but good and loyal words of those who would have remonstrated with the Qin emperors over their abuses.² The founder of the Han dynasty (221 BCE–206 CE), Han Gaozu (256–195 BCE), appreciated goodness and heeded remonstrations. He brought together the wisdom of all below heaven and so consolidated authority throughout his empire. With respectfulness and frugality, Han Gaozu’s son, Emperor Xiao Wen (202–157 BCE), brought peace and prosperity to the realm below heaven. Emperor Xiao Wen’s grandson, Emperor Xiao Wu (156–87 BCE), favored those who offered loyal remonstrations and was pleased to hear their utmost and honest words. These emperors thus laid the foundations for the 400-year reign of the Han dynasty.

“A ruler who is too clever and brilliant in scrutinizing things will end up punishing many people. That is not the way of heaven. It is said that *yang* always prevails during summer, nurturing life, while *yin* always prevails during winter, expanding in emptiness and inactivity. From this we know that the way of heaven relies on compassion and virtue, but not on laws and punishments.

“How awesome is the interaction between heaven and humanity! When a realm has lost the way and defeat is imminent, heaven sends down calamities and disasters to provide warnings. Calamities and disasters take the form of misfortunes caused by wind, water, and other natural forces. If rulers remain oblivious to the way of heaven, heaven produces strange aberrations that shock and frighten. Such strange aberrations

² The Qin dynasty was one of the most despotic and authoritarian in all Chinese history. While the First Emperor of the Qin did enact many policies that contributed to the unification of China, the brevity of the dynasty he founded resulted from popular dissatisfaction with its harsh rule. The Han dynasty continued many of the policies of the Qin but did so with greater lenience and flexibility and as a result endured for centuries.