

An Intellectual Debate: Ueda Akinari and Motoori Norinaga

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Introduction

“There is a man who does recklessly interpret the things of old... Truly his self-interest is great.”¹ Writing about Motoori Norinaga seven years after his death in 1801, Ueda Akinari was recalling the sentiments he had toward the man with whom he had debated for years on several topics. The debate that these two historical Japanese writers had with one another took place over a large portion of their lifetimes and was complex and replete with conflicts of opinion over the study of ancient Japanese texts. It is in their correspondence and their respective writings that it is possible to understand their worldviews and their intellectual constructions of religion, language, and Japan’s place on the world stage. Despite having never actually met face to face, Motoori and Ueda took part in a dispute over several years that held that nature of a debate; when one man stated his opinion, the other would offer a rebuttal in a kind of “verbal fencing.”² This conflict between the two writers reflects the backgrounds, contemporary contexts, and scholarly motivations of each individual and reveals the inherent differences between the two men. In this study, I will juxtapose the works and ideas of Ueda Akinari and Motoori Norinaga so that the similarities and differences in their thoughts will be apparent. Then, I will place the historical figures into conversation with each other through the analysis of the specific nature and details of their conflict. It can be seen that, despite similar backgrounds, Japanese writers Ueda Akinari (1734-1809) and Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) were in conflict with one another due to a difference in opinion on the ancient Japanese language, a different take on the literality of the *Kojiki*, and their overall placing of Japan in relation to the rest of the world. This conflict is important in its bringing together and publicizing of the thoughts of two well-known and reputable

¹ Ueda Akinari, quoted in Blake Morgan Young, *Ueda Akinari*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1982), 86.

² Blake Young, *Ueda Akinari*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1982), 80.

Japanese scholars during a time period of widespread reflection on thought tradition in Japan as seen in the rise in popularity of the *Kokugaku* school of thought. The dispute shows us what was truly at stake for these two scholarly figures: the importance of ancient Japanese texts and Japan's role as a world power during the Tokugawa period.

Setting the Stage: Tokugawa Japan and 18th Century *Kokugaku*

Ueda Akinari and Motoori Norinaga lived in a constantly shifting society in eighteenth-century Japan. Unlike the samurai-dominated culture of the seventeenth century, the eighteenth century featured intellectual and cultural production by people from all types of backgrounds as the “social strata grew more entangled.”³ Society was changing as a result of changes in the people's views on religion and culture. The National School of Learning, or *Kokugaku*, became more prominent, as well as the Dutch School of Learning, or *Rangaku*, during this time. Because both Ueda Akinari and Motoori Norinaga considered themselves to be *Kokugaku* scholars, it is important for this study to focus on what it meant to be a *Kokugaku* scholar in the eighteenth century. Considered the most “energetic and influential” scholars who wrote about Japan's native legacy, *Kokugaku* scholars aimed to link the mythological past of Japan to the recorded history of the elites to the lives of the common people.⁴ As a group, they were responsible for creating an ideological foundation of national self-awareness that existed in Japan throughout the years. Both Ueda Akinari and Motoori Norinaga spent their careers studying and writing about the national identity of Japan as it was found in the ancient Japanese texts.

The *Kokugaku* Tradition and the Supernatural: Ueda Akinari

Ueda Akinari was born 1734 and grew up as the adopted son of a wealthy merchant in Osaka. During this time, Osaka was one of Japan's largest centers for economic activity, but was undergoing a transformation. It had reached its peak of economic prosperity, and would soon be surpassed economically and culturally by Edo. Nevertheless, Ueda and his family lived in a still-bustling city and the specific area where they resided, Dōjima, was the center of Japan's rice market.⁵ Ueda's early life was academically stimulating, but did not stand out substantially from other literary figures of the Tokugawa period. Like other scholars, Ueda had to learn to read and write, not because he wanted to be a scholar, but because it was an essential skill for carrying on the merchant's

³ Conrad Totman, *Early Modern Japan*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 348.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 366.

⁵ Young, 6.

trade; many of the scholars of the Tokugawa period came from mercantile families. Therefore, Ueda had the necessary skills to write and publish poetry and popular literature by the time he was in his early twenties and thirties.⁶

Ueda made his debut into the literary world at a young age with *haikai* poetry (a popular form of linked verse poetry in Japan) when he entered into the circle of *haikai* master, Ono Shōren, under the name of Gyoen at twenty-two years old. Ueda did not pledge allegiance to one *haikai* master, however. “Displaying even at this age the aloofness and independence that were to characterize him all his life,” Ueda wrote for other masters and was published in other literary circles at a young age. Despite his participation in *haikai*, however, Ueda never truly considered it to be a respectable art form and was often intolerant of writers who took the poetry too seriously; he saw it as less important than the act of discovering Japanese history in the *Kokugaku* tradition. By the time Ueda was in his thirties, he began to write short stories that reflected his “metamorphosis” to the classical Japanese tradition.⁷ In this context, popular literature was that which was read by the artisans and merchants, or those who did not possess political power. It was in Osaka that this type of writing originated and flourished in the first half of the Tokugawa period.⁸ Because of rising literacy rates in Japan and the increase in book production, Ueda’s stories could be within the common man’s reach; by the early 1700s, commoners formed a large percent of the reading public. It was due to this fact that when Ueda began writing his prose and drama, these genres had become “stylized for commercial purposes.”⁹ Thus, his first two collections of short stories, written in 1766 and 1767, conformed to the standards of the popular literature of the day.

In general, Ueda Akinari was best known for his collections of supernatural tales or ghost stories in which he took “delight in the mysterious and problematic.”¹⁰ Ueda’s early prose works, however, were written with a comic tone, and were meant to make fun of human failures while ignoring the repercussions; where Ueda differed from contemporary writers, however, was in his inclusion of pathos with his humor. He often showed how he was sympathetic for his characters while simultaneously providing readers with a clue towards his pessimism that became more and more apparent throughout his career. In one story, Ueda attacked extreme religious piety while still

⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁷ Kengi Hamada, trans., *Tales of Moonlight and Rain: Japanese Gothic Tales by Ueda Akinari*, (Tokyo, Japan: University of Tokyo Press, 1971), xxii.

⁸ Susan Griswold, “The Triumph of Materialism: The Popular Fiction of 18th-Century Japan,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 29 (1995), 236.

⁹ Young, 19.

¹⁰ Totman, 414.

maintaining an undercurrent of sympathy for the characters. In the story, a devout man's son is killed and he "does not grieve; rather he rejoices that his son has been favoured [sic] as to be taken into paradise in his youth." When the man feels that it may be his time to die, however, the man "petitions Amida Buddha with *ikkō isshin* that his personal salvation be delayed."¹¹ With this ironic twist, Ueda incorporates his awareness of the sadness in human life while criticizing those who are too religiously extreme. His use of pathos was a recurring device in Ueda's prose and was undoubtedly a result of his background: "Born out of wedlock, abandoned by his real mother, separated by death from his first foster mother, and left deformed by a debilitating illness, Akinari was too aware of the pain in the world to take the position of a sneering, completely detached observer."¹²

Additionally, Ueda's works also featured criticisms of existing social structures. This can be seen in his story, "*Kōkō wa chikara aritake no sumōtori*," which means "The Sumo Wrestler Who Practiced Filial Piety With All His Might." In this story, Ueda provides a social criticism as well as indicates the role of luck or destiny in a man's life; Ueda attempts to show how man's power is limited. Other of his stories feature Ueda making fun of samurai decline or the decay of martial skill among the military class. In one story, Ueda mocked the breakdown of traditional values when he portrayed a "world in which the abacus [had] become mightier than the sword," thus showing Ueda's emphasis on scholarly knowledge over military arts which Tokugawa society deemed were the most important.¹³ After publishing two collections of short stories, Ueda began to stray away from light fiction in order to delve deeper into writing about literary theory. The 1760s is often seen as a critical and transformative time in Ueda's life and scholarly career. It was then that he began to become increasingly involved with classical literature and became a *Kokugaku* student and eventual learned scholar. After being introduced to scholar Katō Umaki around 1766, Ueda said, "The road to the ancient learning was opened up."¹⁴ In 1771, however, a large fire ravaged Ueda's home, ruined his family business, and changed the course of his life.

Because the revenue received from teaching and writing would not be enough to sustain him, his wife, and his mother, Ueda decided to begin a more lucrative career by practicing medicine. It is important to note, however, that Ueda was not abandoning his dreams of a literary career and that he was not alone in attempting to combine these two roles. Many scholars of the

¹¹ Young, 24.

¹² *Ibid.*, 27-28. This was a point of similarity between Ueda and Motoori. Both writers were emotionally connected to their writings as a result of their upbringings.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁴ Ueda Akinari, quoted in Young, 33.

time period practiced and studied medicine while simultaneously writing and pursuing a literary career.¹⁵ In fact, Ueda remained active in literary circles and continued writing and publishing works in addition to practicing medicine during a majority of his adult life. It was during the 1770s that Ueda published his most famous work, *Ugetsu Monogatari*, which was a collection of nine supernatural tales that is often considered his masterpiece by historians today.¹⁶ *Ugetsu Monogatari*, of *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*, used supernatural aspects in a way that “elevated the novel of the strange and mysterious to a new artistic height.”¹⁷ The stories had both Chinese and Japanese elements and Ueda was innovative as he used some traditional Chinese narratives while interweaving Japanese images, texts, and histories throughout. Each set in the historical past, the stories are each set in locations with rich historical and literary associations in order to evoke a romantic mood for the unexpected encounter with the supernatural that then allowed Ueda to express his deeper desires and fears.¹⁸ Translator Kengi Hamada sums up the collection of tales best:

Ugetsu Monogatari depicts the misery, the pitifulness, the wretchedness, the anger resulting from the wrongdoer-victim relationships in the basic mutuality of living things, or which even the characters were not fully aware...At the same time, it confronts the basic problem of evil in man's existence, in his determination to live and in the various realities that surround him.¹⁹

An example from the story entitled “Homecoming” provides readers with the sentiment of human sorrow while incorporating supernatural elements. After being away from his wife, Miyagi, for years, Katsushiro returns to find that she had died and that her spirit had visited him. A neighbor tells Katsushiro, “...I guess Miyagi's spirit must have returned to the earth to tell you of the long year of suffering she endured.”²⁰ Underlying all of the stories is the theme of man and fate and the collection of tales still maintains its prominent place in Japanese literature. By the early 1780s, Ueda had established himself as a *Kokugaku* scholar as he continued to write and publish works on classical Japanese literature. It was in this role that he saw his greatest contribution to scholarship; he was foremost a *Kokugaku* scholar.²¹

¹⁵ Young, 39. This is another point of comparison between Ueda and Motoori.

¹⁶ Ibid., 45.

¹⁷ Haruo Shirane, ed, *Early Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology, 1600-1900*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 565.

¹⁸ Ibid., 567.

¹⁹ Hamada, xxix.

²⁰ Ibid., 18.

²¹ Totman, 414.

Writing in the 1700s, Ueda Akinari took part in a wide cultural transformation in Tokugawa Japan that included a reevaluation of commoner culture. This was manifested in the economic ascendancy of merchants and tradesmen that resulted in a new social hierarchy, which called into question the dominant social order.²² Previously, the Tokugawa authorities had envisioned a social order, called *shinōkōshō*, in which the merchants were in the ideologically lowest status group because of their so-called preoccupation with money and material goods. However, this ideal social hierarchy did not come to fruition by the middle of the Tokugawa period as the merchants began to experience financial successes. The economic successes became more important in reality than the supposed moral or ethical failings of the merchants. As a writer with a merchant background, Ueda was poised to develop into a successful *Kokugaku* scholar. He began a “conscious search for access to aristocratic culture” through writing and researching Japan’s classical past. He was among many writers that participated in this cultural shift in an attempt to make knowledge known to people of every social status through their works.²³ In a “world of confusion with the breakdown of long cherished social and moral attitudes,” Ueda wrote meaningful poetry and prose that reveals a great deal about how he attempted to live by his own beliefs while trying to discover Japanese past through ancient texts.

The Enduring *Kokugaku* Scholar: Motoori Norinaga

Writing from a merchant background while participating in the cultural shift in Tokugawa Japan was a large similarity between Motoori Norinaga and Ueda Akinari. Rather than Osaka, Motoori was born in a city about 150 miles to the east, Matsuzaka in 1730 into a merchant family.²⁴ Not taking successfully to business, Motoori decided to travel to Kyōto to study literature and medicine.²⁵ This is a similarity between Motoori and Ueda: they were both scholar-physicians during their lifetimes. Their similar paths in life may have to do with their related upbringings in the merchant class. While in Kyōto, Motoori read the Chinese classics, studied ancient Japanese literature, and studied with scholars who influenced his later works.²⁶ Motoori was in Kyōto until 1757, when he returned to his hometown to practice medicine and publish his first

²² C. Andrew Gerstle, ed., *18th Century Japan: Culture and Society*, (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1989), xii.

²³ Ibid., xiii.

²⁴ Shigeru Matsumoto, *Motoori Norinaga, 1730-1801*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 9.

²⁵ Miyamori Asatarō, trans., *Masterpieces of Japanese Poetry: Ancient and Modern*, (Tokyo: Taiseido Shobo Co., 1956), 468.

²⁶ Shirane, 611. The other scholars include Confucian scholar Hori Keizan and Keichū, whose philological methodology was a cornerstone of Motoori’s work.

major work, a treatise on *waka*. It was during the next few years that Motoori developed the notion of *mono no aware*, a literary concept that represented the foundation of Motoori's thoughts on human nature during the majority of his career. A difficult term to translate, *mono no aware* refers to a subtle notion that involved the sympathy or empathy for an object or other living thing. In his own words, Motoori described *mono no aware* as the ability to:

Savor myriad deeds in one's heart, to absorb the essence of
myriad deeds in one's heart according to what one sees with
the eye, hears with the ear, touches with one's being – that is
to know the essence of deeds, to know the essence of things,
to know the *aware* of things.²⁷

According to Motoori, the purpose of literature is to allow writers to express what is in their hearts and to provide expression to the *mono no aware* experience.²⁸ Overall, for Motoori, literature was a vehicle for understanding others as well as becoming the object of emotional empathy. To some scholars, the *mono no aware* concept grew out of his experience as a merchant as he saw the “alienation experienced at the time by urban commoners.”²⁹ He showed through his writings his inherent belief in equality among all people; he saw differences among people as superficial and that *mono no aware* expresses the equality in human nature. It was something that was present and important in all of Motoori's works. In one of his most famous poems, “Cherry Blossoms,” Motoori demonstrates the concept of *mono no aware* as he shows awareness and sympathy for the living plants found in Japan: “Setting aside my worldly affairs, On the cherry-bloom I will gaze, Every day till it withers; for the flowers will last so few days.”³⁰ In this poem, Motoori expresses sadness and sympathy for the cherry blossom flower, which will eventually die. His expression of this emotion is something that is characteristic of several of his works throughout his lifetime, and is another point of similarity between him and Ueda: both men included pathos within their writings, revealing sympathy and feeling in their works.

One of the largest writings that Motoori wrote was on the eighth-century Japanese text, the *Kojiki*, or the *Record of Ancient Matters*. This ancient text describes the creation of Japan by the gods and the descent of the imperial line from divine ancestors; this mythohistory is the basis for Norinaga's immense

²⁷ Motoori Norinaga, quoted in Norma Field, *The Splendor of Longing in the Tale of Genji*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 299.

²⁸ Matsumoto, 45. The literal translation of *mono no aware* is “sadness of things,” but its meaning does not translate into English in the same way.

²⁹ Shirane, 612.

³⁰ Asatarō, 469.

work, the *Kojikiden*, which was wholly completed in 1798.³¹ Motoori began his work on the *Kojiki*, however, in 1764, which demonstrates how the *Kojikiden* truly was Motoori's life's work.³² It was the main reason why Motoori is still considered one of Japan's greatest *Kokugaku* scholars.

Through his study of the *Kojiki*, Motoori hoped to search for the way of the kami, or the Ancient Way. As a *Kokugaku* scholar, Motoori was intent on discovering the true nature of Japanese history and descent. This, he believed, could be found through the intense study of the *Kojiki*. He often saw this ancient text as a "clear mirror" that reflected the Ancient Way and it was his responsibility to clarify this image by wiping off the dust of the "Chinese spirit" from its surface.³³ He argued that the Ancient Way was truly Japanese and that it was superior to Confucianism and to Buddhism. This true Way was a creation of the Japanese Gods, not of human sages, and called for humans to be governed without explicit rules or moral codes that were characteristic of Confucianism. It was to ancient Japanese thought that the people should turn, not to Chinese Confucianism that came from human thought. With this, people would find a way to be free from strict rules and would be able to live in the way of truth. For Motoori, the *Kojiki* provided enough information, including ethical, aesthetic, social, and political norms that were inherently Japanese and that were away from any foreign modes of thought.³⁴ In the first book of the *Kojikiden*, Motoori prepares his readers to consider the *Kojiki* in its full complexity, and makes known directly his disregard of the Chinese in his study of ancient Japanese history when he says:

One should be aware of this type of error [of not being able to distinguish between the Chinese style of writing and the Japanese style of writing], and read the text seeking the pure language of antiquity, without any *contamination* by the Chinese style. To wash off and rid one of these Chinese customs is part of the undertaking of the study of antiquity... The easy willingness to let the language of antiquity which lies at the basis of the work pass by almost unnoticed is quite deplorable. To ignore language and to emphasize principle alone is what is found in the texts of the exhortations of Confucianism and Buddhism in foreign countries...³⁵

³¹ Shirane, 612.

³² Matsumoto, 68. Motoori's interest in the *Kojiki* can be traced back into his twenties as well.

³³ Ibid., 80.

³⁴ Shirane, 613.

³⁵ Motoori Norinaga, *Kojiki-den: Book 1*, trans. Ann Wehmeyer, (Ithaca, NY: East Asia Program Cornell University, 1997), 145. Italization added.

In this quote, we can see how Motoori's Japanese attitude made its way into his writings. Deliberately calling out Confucianism and Buddhism, Motoori is making it clear that the best way to understand language is through what he believes is a purely Japanese lens. It is also the best way to understand the world and the struggle between good and evil. He discounted the rational explanation of good and evil which included reward and retribution that was found in Confucian and Buddhist teachings. Instead, Motoori developed his own notion of good and evil from the *Kojiki*: evil is equal to filth and can be purified with good and cleanliness, and vice versa. Good and evil fortunes alternate and grow out of one another.³⁶ This was just another point of Confucianism and Chinese influence with which Motoori disagreed, which he made apparent in the *Kojikiden*.

Overall, Motoori's reading of the *Kojiki* reveals that he saw a true Japanese history in this ancient text. He believed that the emperor was the son of the sun goddess, Amaterasu, in a divinely established hereditary line. Although Motoori was chiefly concerned with lifetime work on the *Kojiki*, he was still affected by his surroundings, namely the turbulent social and economic situation of late 18th-century Tokugawa Japan. During this time, Japan was being influenced heavily by foreign modes of thought, including Confucian and Buddhist traditions. Because of this, Motoori was increasingly inspired to discover an indigenous, chiefly Japanese history in the ancient texts. Members of the Tokugawa government also took notice of Motoori's work in the *Kokugaku* tradition. In 1787, Tokugawa Harusada, the feudal lord of Kii, asked Motoori for his views on politics and the economy as a *Kokugaku* scholar. In the Tokugawa period, many times a shogun or daimyo would ask a Confucian scholar for advice, but almost never a *Kokugaku* scholar, until now. Because of this, Motoori applied his Ancient Way thought to the existing conditions in Japan. It is in this that we see how Motoori contributed to Japanese society during the time that he was living through his thoughts and ideas.³⁷

After his death in 1801, Motoori's work was continued by his disciples. Throughout his life, he acquired many followers who wanted to continue the *Kokugaku* tradition. Motoori's followers continued his linguistic and literary studies as they worked their way throughout the country. One of his disciples, Hirata Atsutane, molded the Ancient Way into a religious-political ideology that was influential on the movement that resulted in the Meiji Restoration.³⁸ In all, Motoori's life and works were incredibly important in Tokugawa Japan and in the periods following his lifetime. As he worked to locate a truly

³⁶ Matsumoto, 99-100.

³⁷ Ibid., 127.

³⁸ Shirane, 613.

Japanese identity through ancient texts, he furthered the *Kokugaku* tradition in a meaningful and enduring way.

The Dispute: Ueda Akinari and Motoori Norinaga

Ueda Akinari and Motoori Norinaga engaged in a debate throughout their careers that reveals a lot about their respective ideas and views on the *Kokugaku* tradition. As both Ueda Akinari and Motoori Norinaga worked in similar fields and came from similar backgrounds, it was inevitable that they would come into contact with one another. What resulted, however, was a long, fierce debate over several years. In a strictly intellectual debate, the two men were both knowledgeable enough to square off against one another on fundamental issues in relation to National Learning, or *Kokugaku* studies, including philology and the literality of the *Kojiki*, ultimately leading to a difference in opinion on Japan's place on the world stage. It was by 1783 that Ueda began to openly criticize Motoori's work on the *Kojiki*, which evoked a series of heated responses.³⁹ Historians have mainly found evidence of the debate through a published work, *Kakaika*, which presents the dispute in the form of a debate between the two men, with Ueda first stating his position and then Motoori offering his rebuttal. Ueda biographer, Young, categorized the dispute into two main areas of conflict: the ancient Japanese language and Japan's position on the world stage in relation to other nations as it is found through the ancient Japanese texts.⁴⁰

One aspect of the debate between Ueda and Motoori concerned the significance of the ancient texts on contemporary Japanese culture and society. Like some other *Kokugaku* scholars, Ueda believed that the *Kojiki* was only legend, not fact.⁴¹ In Motoori's view, however, these ancient texts provided a direct look into Japan's past, much like a mirror. He thought that the *Kojiki* must be accepted in its entirety, no matter how implausible its contents may have been. Instead, Ueda saw apparent inconsistencies that created a complexity in the texts that Motoori could never understand.⁴² This part of the dispute is best seen in the two men's stances on Japan's prominence on the world stage as well as its divine origins. Taking a so-called "rational" perspective, Ueda challenges Motoori on several accounts, most importantly in which he asks Motoori how he can be certain that Japan was created first in the world when it is a geographically small land and other countries have their own ancient

³⁹ Susan L. Burns, *Before the Nation: Kokugaku and the Imagining of Community in Early Modern Japan*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 103.

⁴⁰ Young, 80-83.

⁴¹ Reider, 45. The *Nihongi* was another ancient Japanese text, which in English means the *Chronicles of Japan*.

⁴² Burns, 111.

traditions that counter Japan's. By raising these issues, Ueda basically implies that to accept the ancient texts as they are written means to accept some ancient evidence while excluding others and that this was an unscholarly way to write about the *Kokugaku* school of thought.⁴³ Ueda's attack was critical and harsh, but Motoori's arguments were supported with his own confidence, his high reputation, and his immense knowledge about the classics. Despite Ueda's stance, Motoori maintained that Japan was the land of the gods and was supreme over all other nations; he believed that Japan deserved homage from every other country on earth. In response to Ueda's claims, Motoori replied that even though Japan is physically small, it still reigned supreme over all of the earth; he believed that the traditions of other nations were incorrect and only the ancient traditions of Japan are true and authentic. Ueda's rationale was not convincing to Motoori and he never withdrew his assertions. It was, according to Motoori, an obvious way to consider Japan's presence on the world stage.⁴⁴

It is important to note that even though Motoori had responded in a way to defend Japan's greatness, Ueda was not attempting to call Japan insignificant. Rather, he was being realistic in illustrating that people of other lands would not easily accept Japan as the ruler of the world. Called, a "rational critic" of Motoori by biographer Young, Ueda did not believe that legends could be taken as proof of the actual occurrences of days past.⁴⁵ He called Motoori's references to Japan's superiority "cultural chauvinism" and likened it to what was done by the Chinese. Furthermore, like the way that he recognized language's constant ability to change, he also attempted to describe the workings of historical change in a way that put him at odds with Motoori. Like Motoori, Ueda believed that Confucianism and Buddhism had transformed Japanese society. He did not, however, think that these Chinese influences were negative; he just saw them as natural, transformative occurrences that happen in every culture. He did not see the Japan before Confucianism and Buddhism as being necessarily better, and trying to recreate that Japan would be futile. He said:

Things and events change naturally, and there is no way to stop this. It may be possible to study and thereby achieve an imitation of the past, but the notion of recovering the past is nothing but the useless theory of scholars...My teacher once told me, the ways of the past were good in the past, the ways of the present are good in the present.⁴⁶

⁴³ Ibid., 112.

⁴⁴ Young, 83-85.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 85.

⁴⁶ Ueda Akinari, quoted in Burns, 114.

In contrast, Motoori did not see this vagueness in cultural change. To him, recreating the past was completely possible through studying ancient texts. He denounced Ueda's criticisms as the work of a "Chinese mind" and refused to accept his opinions.⁴⁷

Ueda also criticized Motoori's assertion that the *Kojiki* recorded the oral transmissions from ancient Japan in a direct and complete fashion. Throughout the *Kojikiden*, Norinaga attempted to restore the ancient Japanese language, which in his view was the pure Japanese language before it was corrupted by Chinese words and syntax that disrupted this perfect language. Motoori saw these differences between the pure language and the corrupted language, constantly referring to "correct" sounds of the past. Ueda, on the other hand, never implied that linguistic changes made the language correct or incorrect. He argued that, from the perspective of the speaker or author, no sound was any more or less good or natural than any other. He argued that the sounds that Motoori deemed "corrupt" may have actually existed in earlier times and therefore disagreed with Motoori's key argument that the ancient Japanese language was better, or truer, than the current Japanese language.⁴⁸

Other disagreements about language came about due to phonetic and mechanical concerns in the ancient Japanese language. Specifically, the two men didn't see eye to eye on the existence of the "n" sound without a vowel that occurred in the ancient language. This was one of the sounds that Motoori saw as "corrupt," and he claimed that the sound did not appear in any of the old classics and therefore did not occur in verbal language until Chinese influence had brought it into use. Ueda, however, argued that just because the sound was not in ancient texts does not mean that the people did not use it in their verbal communication. He believed that to read characters without the "n" sound in every case would be to "sacrifice the niceties of speech for the sake of the written word."⁴⁹ This was just one example of their disagreements on several different sounds in the ancient Japanese language. This examination of the ancient language by Ueda and Motoori relates to the entirety of their views on Japanese nativism. By each defending their own points, they are putting at stake the question of whether or not Confucianism actually "corrupted" the Japanese language and revealing their thoughts on the supremacy of Japan over China and other countries around the world.

Overall, Ueda believed that Motoori had ignored the complex relationship between writing and speech that existed in ancient Japan. Motoori, however, saw this critique as a direct questioning of the foundation of the

⁴⁷ Reider, 45.

⁴⁸ Burns, 106.

⁴⁹ Young, 81.

Kojikiden because what Ueda was questioning was largely the foundation for Motoori's work; he believed that Ueda was trying to prove that Motoori's reconstruction of the ancient language was all for naught. Some scholars have suggested, however, that Ueda was simply attempting to point out the flaws in Motoori's philological claims, not to produce a different knowledge of the language. At the heart of his argument was his claim that writing had always existed in an erratic relationship with orality.⁵⁰ For Ueda, what was at stake in pointing out these flaws was a broader opinion on the nature of language and society. He recognized the dynamic nature of language and how it would always be transforming over time. He was critical of Motoori's claims because he felt that language was forever undergoing change.⁵¹

The quarrel between the two men ended when Motoori compiled and published the *Kakaika* sometime around 1787. Ueda never made a formal response to the final rebuttal from Motoori, but still maintained that the past is not something that could be restored, but only learned from; it was then that he formally called off the dispute because he was "too busy" to carry things further.⁵² For the rest of his life, however, Ueda held negative feelings toward Motoori, even after Motoori had passed away.⁵³ There were definite feelings of antagonism left between the two men as they formally ended what has been considered one of the most famous intellectual confrontations in early modern Japanese history.

Conclusion

Through their individual works as well as their collaborative dispute through writings, Ueda Akinari and Motoori Norinaga have left an incredible legacy for future generations of Japanese students and scholars. Even though they disagreed openly on the veracity and exact truth of Japan's ancient texts, both men would have agreed that Japan had a unique past that could be found through studying these texts. Examining their discussions can provide us with insight into the kinds of ideas that people in Tokugawa Japan held about their country. As a scholar, Motoori had identified a unique Japanese-ness that put Japan on a pedestal over all other countries. Ueda had a rational viewpoint that respected the traditions of other nations while still recognizing the importance of maintaining Japanese culture. Together, the two men furthered *Kokugaku*

⁵⁰ Burns, 107-109.

⁵¹ Noriko T. Reider, *Tales of the Supernatural in Early Modern Japan*: Kaidan, Akinari, *Ugetsu Monogatari*, (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 44.

⁵² Young, 86.

⁵³ What he wrote and felt can be seen in the quote written in 1808 in the first line of the introduction to this paper.

studies through their poetry, stories, analytical writings, and of course, through their dispute with one another.

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