CHAPTER THREE

KAMEI NANMEI: “POLITICS IS LEARNING AND LEARNING IS POLITICS”

The earliest and still the most famous intervention in the long debate over the gold seal was that of the doctor and Confucian scholar Kamei Nanmei 龜井南冥 (1743–1814). Although not well known except to specialists in the field of Japanese Neo-Confucianism and local scholars in Fukuoka, in his day Nanmei’s name was recognized throughout the country, and he drew disciples from far beyond the borders of his native Chikuzen domain (Fukuoka). He was born in the town of Meinohama 姪ノ浜, where his father Kamei Chōin 龜井聽因 (1703–1780)—a poet, student of ancient learning, admirer of Ogyū Sorai 荻生徂徠 (1666–1728), and a poor doctor who had earlier gone to the capital in Edo to study “Koihō” 古醫方 (lit., ancient medical practices), an approach to medicine based on a return to the ancient texts stripped of later obfuscating accretions—had established a clinic. In typically East Asian fashion, the Koihō movement was fundamentally reformist in its call to set things right by returning to antiquity and positing the need to base conclusions on experience rather than simply theory. When he later returned home from Kyoto, Chōin settled in Fukuoka and opened his own modest medical clinic in 1764 in the Tōjinmachi 唐人町 section of the western part of the castle town.

Nanmei himself studied medicine locally as well as in other domains. As a younger, he also studied the Confucian classics and the composition of Chinese-language poetry and prose, initially with a Zen monk and poet by the name of Taichō 大潮 (Gesshi Genkō 月枝元皓, 1676–1768) from Hasunoike 蓮の池, a sub-domain of Hizen 肥前 domain (present-day Saga Prefecture 佐賀県) in Kyushu. Taichō had been close to Ogyū Sorai and a number of his disciples, and like Sorai he emphasized an ancient-learning style of writing which harkened back to the literary forms of the intellectual world of the Qin and Han empires in China. In 1759 at the age of fifteen, Nanmei traveled to Nagasaki and exchanged poetry with the well-known poet Kō Yōkoku 高暘谷 (1718/9–1766). In 1762 he traveled to Kyoto and Osaka as well, before returning to Fukuoka the next year.

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1 His various styles include Dōsai 道載 and Oroka 魯, among others.
That year he helped his father open a private Confucian academy, the Hieikan 蟻英館, in Hakata 博多, thus embodying the ideal of the Confucian (or simply scholarly) doctor (Jui 儒醫) prominent throughout the later Edo period in Japan. Nanmei traveled that same year to the Kansai area to study medicine in Osaka with Nagatomi Dokushōan 永富獨嘯庵 (1732–1766), who although still young was already a recognized authority in the field of Koihō, and in Kyoto with Yoshimasu Tōdō 吉益東洞 (1702–1773), one of the great master-practitioners of Koihō.2 After returning home the following year, a twenty-year-old Nanmei met with one of the members of an embassy from Korea that had come to Japan, when it passed through his domain, at Aishima 藍島, an island off the coast of contemporary Kita-Kyūshū 北九州 and at the time part of Chikuzen domain. Lacking a shared vernacular, the two men did the traditional East Asian thing: they exchanged poetry in literary Chinese. This event gave national currency to Nanmei’s name and early accomplishments.3

Beginning in 1764, at age twenty-one, Nanmei both practiced medicine with his father at their clinic-school in Tōjinmachi and lectured on Confucianism at the Hieikan and elsewhere around the region. Their goal was to raise the stature of the medical profession itself. When Chōin died several years later, the Hieikan had already become a major center for both the medical arts and Confucian learning. The goal of unifying these two disciplines was thus being achieved, with each burnishing and enhancing the other’s image and importance in symbiotic fashion.

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