

## The Japanization of Confucianism

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### ABSTRACT

Confucianism from China has penetrated into Japan since the fifth century. But it was overshadowed by Buddhism for thousand years. It was then made use of when Ieyasu established the Tokugawa regime.

In the Tokugawa period, it is an undisputed fact that Confucianism or Neo - Confucianism was put to use by Tokugawa Ieyasu as a bakufu ideology, though informally. At the same time, we can not deny that Japan's supreme rulers, from Oda Nobunaga through Tokugawa Iemitsu conciously deployed strategies by mythologizing their personal and their position. Moreover, the Tokugawa ideology was more or less a mixture of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shintō.

Neo - Confucians in Tokugawa period sought to provide the warriors with a clearer class identity than before. Tokugawa learned to organize and manage great masses of people. They were able to transfer skills from the military to the social and political realm. Such enabled the Tokugawa government to Japanize Confucianism and accordingly the Japanese Confucianism was different from the mainland's original confucianism.

In the nineteenth - century, late Edo, the threat came both from within and from without, beyond Japan's borders. Thus, such situations had given rooms for variety of ideas and practices. When, in the 1890s, the Japanese government needed to stipulate a set of values to sharpen model citizens through the educational system. During the crisis of the 1930s, nationalism mobilized the Japanese to the highest degree, the state turned to Yamazaki Ansai's ideology. After the Second World War, the focus of their attention was on Japan's economic success. And again they had begun to praise the capitalists benefits to be drawn from a maintenance of "feudal" and the military values ( the bushidō which covered the Confucian, Buddhist, and Shintō values ).

So far Japanese Confucianism stood for the worldly life and socialization in the Japanese society. It affirms the Japanese to be realistic and pragmatic. Thus, Confucianism has provided favorable atmosphere for the Japanese characteristics to promote the rapid modernization. Without pragmatic and humanistic Confucianism, Japan might still have been a conservative and agrarian country.

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## OBJECTIVES

1. To study the evolution of Confucian culture in Japan.
2. To learn how Japan has Japanized and made use of Confucianism in order to modernize the nation.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is a historical research, thus most of the investigation was in the form of documentary research. However, in order to understand the impact of Confucianism in modern Japan, the researcher also used an interview method and distributed questionnaire ( about 200 persons ) to survey the Japanese attitudes towards Confucianism at present.

## RESULT

Japan has been the melting pot of both indigenous and foreign cultures : Shintō, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Interestingly, each contains flexibility and moves toward secularism. Confucianism is obviously relevant, motivating the man in the street. Thus, Japan successfully uses it to develop and modernize the country. Such case can also be illustrated by the new industrialized Confucian countries as Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore. Thus Japan may be called a bourgeois Confucian because loyalty, devotion, and hard work have been inculcated by Confucian ethics, and more or less supported by other traditions including folk religion, and have now turned Japan from the support of military authoritarianism to entrepreneurial expansion.

### 1. History of Japanese Confucianism

Along with Buddhism, Confucianism was introduced to Japan in the sixth century. It was Prince Shōtoku, the regent of Empress Suiko, who wrote the Constitution of Seventeen Articles which embraced several Confucian teachings. In the Taika Reformation, the centralized government was founded with Confucian support. But, we must keep in mind that Chinese ethics were conditioned to match the Japanese attitudes.

Confucianism competed with Buddhism in winning the imperial support. It was at first less known despite its modern outlook.

Confucianism introduced into Japan during the early period of Japanese feudalism was Neo - Confucianism of Chu Hsi and Wang Yang - ming of the Sung and the Ming, respectively. " Ju " refers to Confucius himself and " jukyō " refers to Confucianism in general. It became incorporated into " bushidō ", the Way of the Warrior. The main methodology of Chu Hsi or Neo - Confucianism is the investigation of things both scholarly and spiritually. However, it achieved independent status from Buddhism at the time of Tokugawa Ieyasu ( 1542 - 1616 ), who appointed the leading Confucians to be his advisers of the state affairs. The Way of the Sages was then emphasized. And the main methodology of Neo - Confucianism is the investigation of things which led to the emergence of the national learning. Hayashi Razan was one of the most famous Confucianists.

Tokugawa Jikki ( The True Tokugawa Records ) conveyed the importance of the great learning following the Way of the Sages as follows :

Ieyasu had conquered the nation on horseback, but being an enlightened and wise man, realized early that the land could not be governed from a horse. He had always respected and believed in the Way of the Sages.... Therefore from the beginning he encouraged learning.<sup>1</sup>

However, in the Tokugawa period, no single tradition was privileged and any doctrine running counter to bakufu interest had to be suppressed or went underground. In the late seventeenth century, the Kimon schools of Yamazaki Ansai ( 1618 - 1682 ) played the prominent role of Neo - Confucianism.<sup>2</sup> " Warongo " also stood for a popular Shintō, along with Suzuki Shōzan's Buddhist ideology.<sup>3</sup>

In the mid - eighteenth century, it was the argument over the political doctrine of the Shogunate government calling for the ruler's absolutism and utilitarianism drawn from Ogyū Sorai's theory. However, it was Ninomiya Sontoku, the most famous religious leader who blended Buddhism, Shintō, and Confucianism into one single ethical framework.

Late Tokugawa Confucianism was under changes. However, running through

various theories, there was a common moral faith in a natural economy. The ethical government would realized the economic value of Confucianism which stressed hard work and frugality, according to Baigan's Shingaku movement. Moreover, Ogyū Sorai's political utilitarianism opened the way to the nativists' movement led by Motoori Norinaga and Hirata Atsutane.<sup>4</sup>

From 1800 - 1915 Japan searched for an ideology suitable for modern Japan. That was to build a rich nation and a strong army ( fukoku kyōhei ). Accordingly, in Late Meiji, progress had brought Japan a complicated society. The ideologists then urged patriotism, social harmony, along with the national loyalty. The victory of confucian ethics was seen by the Imperial Rescript on Education in 1890. It was the effort to counter westernization through the hard work of Motoda Eifu and Inoue Kowashi.<sup>5</sup> The spirit of the Imperial Rescript of Education can be illustrated as follows :

Our Imperial Ancestors have founded our Empire on a basis broad and everlasting, and have deeply and firmly implanted virtue; our subjects ever united in loyalty, and filial piety have from generation to generation illustrated beau-

<sup>1</sup> Herman Ooms, " Neo - Confucianism and the Formation of Early Tokugawa Ideology : Contours of a Problem, " in Peter Nosco ( ed. ), *Confucianism and Tokugawa Cultures* ( New - Jersey : Princeton University Press, 1984 ), pp. 28 - 9.

<sup>2</sup> Herman Ooms, *Tokugawa Ideology : Early Constructed 1570 - 1680* ( New - Jersey : Princeton University Press, 1985 ), pp. 194 - 6.

<sup>3</sup> Royall Tyler, " The Tokugawa Peace and Popular Religion : Suzuki Shōsan, Kakugyō Tōbutsu, and Jiki-gyō Miroku ", in Peter Nosco ( ed. ), *op.cit.*, pp. 93 - 5.

<sup>4</sup> H.D. Harootinian, " The Consciousness of Archaic Form in the New Realism of Kokugaku; " in Tetsuo Najita and Irwin Scheiner ( ed. ), *Japanese Thought in the Tokugawa Period 1600 - 1868 : Methods and Metaphores* ( Chicago and London : The University of Chicago, 1978 ), pp. 63 - 104.

<sup>5</sup> Sharon H. Nolte, " National Morality and Universal Ethics : Onishi Hajime and the Imperial Rescript on Education, " *Momenta Nipponica*, 38 : 3, pp. 283 - 8.

ty thereof. This is the glory of the fundamental character of Our Empire - Ye, Our Subjects, be filial to your parents; extend your benevolence to all... So shall ye not only be Our good and faithful subject, but render illustrious the best tradition of your forefathers.<sup>6</sup>

In case of the economic development, Carol Gluck concluded the Confucian impact on the Japanese society especially on economic success as follows :

Without the established notions of self-improvement that characterized Confucian thought and popular social morality of Tokugawa period, neither the doctrines of self - help nor the association of education with personal success would have fallen on ears. Moreover a venerable Confucian ambivalence toward getting and spending underlay the ideological queasiness toward money, which concealed entrepreneurial aggressiveness in the spiritual armor of bushidō and muted the emphasis on business that might easily suited a surging capitalist economy.<sup>7</sup>

In conclusion, the pre - war ideology was set up by these components :<sup>8</sup>

a. Ninomiya Sontoku's teaching of

“ boundless gratitude to nature ” found in the traditional religions of Pure Land Buddhism ( Jōdoshū ) and Neo - Shintoism ( fukuka Shintō )

b. The idea that man's hard work is part of the natural order was cherished by the Confucians of the pre - Han period.

Neo - Confucianism became more Japanized from the Meiji Restoration to the end of the Pacific War than in the preceding periods. National policy was to unify the nation and emphasised Emperorism justified by the Confucianist as a necessary step to build a modern state.

From 1945 to the present, Confucianism has been attacked as a pre - war ethic of aggressiveness. Nevertheless, the Japanese cannot be fully westernized because of the Japanese Confucian individualism whose ideology often mixes with loyalty to the superior and with filial piety toward the ancestors :

...no matter how strong the external pressure, the non - Western world can not be transformed into a perfect facsimile of the West. When these societies come under strong pressure from the West their cultural traditions resist rapid change, and yet they are forced, for their own survival, to seek to develop their own approach to modernization through rapid self transformation<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Pensri Manchanomai “ Religions and Japanese Modernization ”, in Kunio Yoshi - hara ( ed. ), *Thai Perceptions of Japanese Modernization* ( Japan : Kyoto University Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1989 ), p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Carol Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths* ( New Jersey : Princeton University Press, 1985 ), pp. 258 - 9.

<sup>8</sup> S. Cho, “ Japanese Family Ideology in the Light of the Chinese and Korean Moral Philosophies ” In S. Cho and N. Runeby ( ed. ), *Traditional Thought and Ideological Change : Sweden and Japan in the Age of Industrialization* ( Sweden : University of Stockholm, 1988 ), p. 201.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in the book's review on Shively ( ed. ) *Tradition and Modernization in Japanese Culture*, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 31 : 3 ( May, 1972 ), p. 479.

## 2. The Japanization of Confucianism :

It is very difficult to differentiate Confucianism as an independent culture in Japan since it has been under the long process of Japanization. Especially, when Japan had her own written language in the ninth century, she then started to Japanize Chinese culture to a large degree. And Japanese Confucianism underwent considerable modifications.

### 2.1 The idea of the Mandate of Heaven :

While the Chinese held "Mandate of Heaven" to the reason for changing the tyrant dynasty, the Japanese instead had the concept of the Emperor as the divine ruler, with then unchanging dynasty, though the idea of the emperor as the "Son of Heaven" was the same. Moreover, the Japanese developed the *ōdō* or the Kingly Way. *Tendō* was for the Emperor and *ōdō* was for Shōgun.

**2.2 The ideology concerning the imperial institution :** With the vast land and diverse peoples, the long history of China yielded to the absolute power of the emperor to rule the whole country in the name of "Son of Heaven" and whoever was proved to be capable for the title could rule over the realm. Japan adopted the "tennō" system but under the law of the hereditary custom and when Shōgun was approved by the Emperor.

For a thousand of years the imperial rule was passive and indirect while the Shōgunate was more active and direct.

Moreover, to build up a strong national unity, Japanese Confucianism, unlike Chinese Confucianism in which the supreme power was benevolence, attacked a special

emphasis to the concepts of loyalty and harmony. However, after the Meiji Restoration, the emperor had no absolute and direct power over people. Confucianism aimed of cultivating the individual qualities in times of national contingency.

On January 1, 1946, Emperor Hirohito went further by declaring that he was not divine.

### 2.3 The idea on Confucian values :

In general Confucius had laid down the social hierarchy - Five Human Relationships along with Five obligations.<sup>10</sup> He put "filial piety" before "loyalty" while Japan did the opposite in order to strengthen the tie between the lord and the samurai because the ideal society of the Japanese was the military. Absolute loyalty was also prevalent in case of the family discipline.<sup>11</sup> Thus the filial piety in Japan was developed to suit the dominant military government in the feudal age. "loyalty" became the central value of the society.<sup>12</sup>

In case of "benevolence", while Confucius raised it as the highest value of the government, the Japanese Confucianism touched it lightly. This can be illustrated by Prince Shōtoku's Seventeen Articles Constitution which was regarded as the key to understand the Japanese culture and very Confucianistic. Articles 1 - 3 were related to "Wa" (Harmony) ; Articles 4 - 8 to "Propriety" ; Articles 9 - 11 to "Trustworthiness" Articles 12 - 14 to "Loyalty" to Rulers; and Articles 15 - 17 to "Wisdom" or knowledge. Thus, the Constitution recognized the highest virtue of "Wa" which was not strictly speaking as a Confucian virtue. It

<sup>10</sup> S. Cho., *op.cit.*, p. 203.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

could be explained when we recalled the warring state in Japan around 200 B.C. to 200 A.D. and around the Middle Ages (12th - 15th centuries). Moreover, Prince Shōtoku stated that Buddhism should be propagated in order to raise the moral level.

As a whole, the virtues of harmony, propriety, loyalty, benevolence, sincerity and righteousness are highly regarded as more Confucian ideas than Buddhist. In addition, the neglect of benevolence and the emphasis on loyalty must be regarded as a characteristic peculiar to Japanese Confucianism<sup>13</sup>. Loyalty in Japanese sense of service to one's lord blindly could be in conflict with loyalty of being true to one's own conscience as held in China.

#### 2.4 The idea on the social hierarchy :

It is stated that the Confucian doctrine of Five Relationships has a basic sense of social hierarchy or seniority and the duty of filial piety which is found in the ancestor-worship cult. Filial piety is the first of all Confucian virtues and provides a model for social behavior. In China, in the past, people respected the scholars as the highest class. Then, they tried to become learned men in order to be respected by the others. People were selected to the official ranks according to their ability and to the examination passed.

On the contrary, Japan mixed the Chinese hierarchy with her indigenous cult of the blood system. When Japan adopted the bureaucratic system, it was blood system not merit system. Japan has developed a stronger class society, even until now.

Since the eighth century, the hereditary nature was individually stratified until the Japanese society was divided into four different classes : the warrior, farmer, artisan, and the merchant. Each had its own code to maintain the harmony of the society. Though there were many records of the farmers' revolt in the late Tokugawa, they did not challenge the lord's rights to rule, unlike the Chinese peasants' revolts which were sometimes able to overthrow the ruler.

In case of religions, from time to time, Shintō, Buddhism, and Confucianism competed with each other to stand for the state ideology. On the contrary China paid no attention to make use of religion politically. The religious faith depended on individuals or small groups.

In the economic field, we can see the Japanese government and politicians developed a close tie with the private companies while Confucianism in China developed the idea that "gentlemen" must not care about making money. Although the Zai-batsu, the gigantic business group was destroyed in the postwar period, we still see the close tie of the government and business sections in various hierarchical levels. Such is the Japanese uniqueness of hierarchy. As long as the proper is maintained the Japanese will carry on if without protest. They feel safe...they have accepted hierarchy as legitimate.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the "Yaku" system in Japan enables all classes to live in harmony. It was the obligation of the individual with the sense of responsibility. Thus the yaku could maintain the social stability and hierarchy.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Michio Morishima, *Why Has Japan Succeeded?* ( U.S.A. : Cambridge University Press, 1982 ), p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* ( London : Rutledge & Kegan Paul, 1967 ), p. 67.

<sup>15</sup> Bitō Masahide, " Society and Social Thought in the Tokugawa Period, " *The Japan Foundation Newsletter*, 9 : 2,3 ( June - September, 1981 ), pp. 4 - 6.

**2.5 The idea on social behavior ("shame" and "giri") :** Both Japanese and Chinese societies are aware much of shame consciousness. But, in China, shame consciousness is related to moral sense while, in Japan, it is to social sense. Moreover, while Japan maintained laws and regulations, Chinese Confucianism opposed them in favor of morality and ceremony.

The sense on social behavior is very strong in Japanese society which is full of "kō" (obligation to perform for the family), "chū" (obligation to perform for the society), and "giri". Both Japanese and Chinese will feel shameful when they fail to show kō and chū. Nevertheless, shame consciousness makes the Japanese shy and timid in front of the foreigners and strangers unlike the Chinese who have more self-composure because of their individualistic character. What makes the Japanese more different from the Chinese is the idea of "giri". Giri to one's name is the duty to keep one's reputation unspotted. Failure to keep giri is often followed by the action of "seppaku" or harakiri which is Japanese uniqueness.<sup>16</sup>

**2.6 The idea of individuality and collectivity :** Chinese Confucian doctrine is concerned with individualism or individual capacity. But the Japanese has refashioned Confucian thoughts to conform to the Japanese social collectivity. Thus, they denied the tradition of the Chinese Mandate of Heaven of choosing the emperors and the examination for the bureaucratic government. They maintained the hereditary system. They even demanded the unity of religions and

government. Thus, Confucianism was modified to serve the state-unity. It was of a type in which the group's interest was promoted at the cost of individual interest. They made use of Confucianism to stir the feeling of ultra nationalism that the Japanese were the leader of the Eastern culture (Confucianism) which had been confronting with the Western culture during the Second World War.

**2.7 The idea on the national polity :** Along with the unbroken dynasty, Japan can easily stabilize the country which is accordingly developed rapidly. Although Japan had a kind of dual government during the feudal age, it did not obstruct her nation-building since the imperial court had been passive most of the time. Moreover, Japanese Confucians were careful in applying Confucianism to the spirit of nationalism and militarism along with the idea of politico-religious structure that made Japan different from all other countries.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the highest class, of the society was the military class whose ethics (bushidō) were followed by the other classes.<sup>18</sup> The most favorable models were of diligence, patience, discipline, frugal, and humble, etc. In short, Japanese Confucianism was remarkably nationalistic while the Chinese was humanistic which brought about dictatorship and communism in the 1930s and 1940s, respectively.

**2.8 The idea on the social ideology :** Instead of dividing society into literate and illiterate classes, Japan developed Japanese society into four classes with separate specifications of each class's career and obliga-

<sup>16</sup> Ruth Benedict, *op.cit.*, pp. 94 - 123.

<sup>17</sup> Robert N. Bellah, "Baigan and Sorai : Continuities and Discontinuities in Eighteen - Century Japanese Thought," in Tetsuo Najita and Irwin Scheiner, *op.cit.*, p. 155.

<sup>18</sup> Michio Morishima, *op.cit.*, p. 157.

tions : the samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants, respectively. Each was taught to satisfy his own status and thus helped pacify the Tokugawa government for more than 250 years. Neo - Confucian ideology was spreaded out among classes as well, while, in China, Neo - Confucianism had been directed to the ruling cadres and not to the mass. Even with regard to the Way of the Warrior, the Bushidō, it was not only the samurai, but also the commoners who practiced it in their daily life :

...live simply and without air; avoid lewd talk at banquet; be simply in military clothing and equipment; have only what is necessary in clothes, food and dwelling and do not help excess possessions; and be economical in expenditure though not failing to help relatives and friends in distress.<sup>19</sup>

It is said that the Japanese Confucianism surpassed Chinese Confucianism when it is the mixture of the select ideologies among Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shintō which successfully, from time to time, help develop and modernize Japan. Those ideologists were Yamagata Ansai, Hosoi Heishū, Itō Jinsai, Miyake Sekian, Ishida Baigan, and Ninomiya Sontoku, etc. They worked hard to raise the level of education for all classes in the society. The Japanese were then qualified to modernize the nation.

## CONCLUSION

On the whole, all cultures in Japan, no matter indigenous or foreign, mingled with each other to become a religion and ideology of pro - government type. Japanese Confucianism was a far more enthusiastic upholder of the existing regime than was Chinese Confucianism. Its role in Tokugawa period was that of an ideology. In the Meiji period, its role was the justification of the Emperor regime or Meiji Restoration. In the prewar period it was used to urge people's unity and collectivity as a family - state, thus it was for nationalism. Even in this post - war period we still see its impact upon the people's daily life and the Japanese economic world. Confucian impact is then continuous. It also provides the present Japan with democratic idea on humanism.<sup>20</sup> The impact of Japanese Confucianism on Japanese modernization can be seen through the historical process of political, social, and economical development.

So far, Japanese Confucianism has stood for the worldly life and socialization in the Japanese society. It affirms the Japanese to be realistic and pragmatic. Thus, Confucianism has provided favorable atmosphere for the Japanese characteristics to promote rapid modernization. Without pragmatic and humanistic Confucianism, Japan might still be a conservative and agrarian country.

<sup>19</sup> Robert N. Bellah, *op.cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>20</sup> Warren W. Smith Jr., *Confucianism in Modern Japan* ( Tokyo : Kokuseido, 1973 ), p. 137.



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