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Japanese Attitudes to Western Individualism and Confucianism

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I

As the 21st century approaches, the focus of world economic development is clearly shifting from the West to the Asian countries and areas. Since 1983, the East Asian nations have come to surpass Europe in terms of respective shares of U.S. foreign trade. What this means is that the world's largest volume of economic activity now flows from East Asia across the Pacific, despite recent economic crisis in East Asia since 1997.

In this situation, a new approach is being taken with regard to East Asian problems both in Japan and abroad --- namely attempts to find a key to the economic development of the region in the context of its definition as the Confucian Culture Area. Highly sophisticated academic studies had done with a view to throwing fresh light on Confucian ethics, and exploring the traditions and spirit which contribute to modernization, industrialization, and economic development in East Asia.ⁱ

If East Asia is defined as a Chinese Culture Area or *Kanji* (Chinese character) Culture Area, or, at its simplest level, a "Chopstick Culture," apart from the "Three Chinas,"ⁱⁱ (the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong), it includes such countries as Japan, the Republic of Korea, the People's Republic of Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam, and even the overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia.

However, Confucian Culture Area is a term that must be examined with close critical scrutiny. First, we must at all times be conscious of the fact that we can easily fall prey to trite cultural anthropological formulas. A second problem in promoting the idea of a Confucian Cultural Area is recognizing the fact that Confucian culture, in actuality, has no meaningful direct influence on real economic development in East Asia. In this respect, Confucian culture means the common historical experiences of Confucian ethics and norms which have influenced East Asian society. It does not mean Confucianism and the study of *The Analects of Confucius*, for there are no direct linkages between Confucianism and economic development. It can be said that that traditional Confucian culture itself is gradually dying out in East Asia. In Japan, many people are very familiar with democracy, in particular, with Western individualism. Individualism has become a symbolic culture of their lifestyle. On the contrary, Confucianism is now a traditional atmosphere of the culture among most of Japanese.

II

As noted earlier, the Confucian Culture Area might alternately be recognized as the Chopstick Culture. Yet despite this blanket categorization, individual countries demonstrate their own peculiarities. This same nonuniformity exists in matters of Confucian ethics: each country follows Confucian doctrine according to its own individual interpretation.

The Confucian virtues themselves are interpreted in varying manners in China and Japan, and also in South and North Korea and other countries. Confucian doctrine is primarily based on two principles: loyalty and filial piety. These in turn are sustained by five virtues: benevolence, duty, ritual, wisdom, and trust. Traditionally, Japan and Korea have attached greater importance to the principle of loyalty than China. According to Dr. Yoshio Takeuchi, author of an authoritative work *The Spirit of Confucianism* on the Confucian spirit: "Whereas Chinese Confucian ethics have focused on the family and the concept of filial piety, in Japan these same ethics have been advocated principally in terms of the national state and loyalty rather than filial piety."ⁱⁱⁱ

While the social emphasis on filial piety has been greatly diminished in modern Japanese society, it continues at a very profound level in South Korea, where respect for elders remains an ingrained tradition.

Among his five enumerated virtues, Confucius himself assigned the highest value to

“benevolence,” which he defined as sincerity deriving from man's intrinsic emotions. In Japan, however, the idea of benevolence, which is the wellspring of humanitarianism in the Confucian context, has had only limited appeal. In contrast, it is valued extremely highly in traditional China.

The virtue defined as “ritual” is generally ingrained in society as a norm of behavior established through habitual custom. As a social standard, emphasis on ritual is identifiable in all nations in the Confucian Culture Area. It is perhaps most strongly present in China. In modern Japan, the highest Confucian virtue would appear to be “duty.”

Even with these great mutual differences, however, we cannot help but note the fact that the nations of the Confucian Culture Area, as a whole, are experiencing great economic development at present.

III

Now let me touch upon some important aspects of Confucian culture with respect to economic development.

The most distinctive feature of Confucian culture, in my judgment, is the social order based on family collectivism or small groups operating in the society. Professor Il-gon Kim said, “In East Asia, successful economic development was brought about by the cultural background of Confucian collectivism which affected the capitalist systems.”^{iv} This is an interesting observation. It suggests that collectivism tied to Confucian ethics may be an important factor behind the economic development of countries in East Asia.

Family collectivism, furthermore, affects more than just labor organization. As Japan's enormous business corporations clearly demonstrate, family collectivism also sets a standard for corporate management through the organization of an entire group lifestyle, embracing the corporate members as well as their families. The genealogy of the powerful merchants of the early Edo Period who came to form Mitsui, Sumitomo and other big businesses known in Japanese as *zaibatsu*, provides evidence of this phenomenon. Here it is also important to note that the Confucian doctrine of “following the middle path,” or seeking “harmony,” or *wa* in Japanese, serves an important cohesive and harmonizing role in corporate activities. It is not impossible, even, to recognize the lifelong employment system or individual corporate labor union as manifestations of Confucian thought. As a result, most of Japanese have very ambivalent feeling toward Western individualism, which was taught through school education, especially after the World War II.

A second distinguishing feature of the Confucian Culture is its strong emphasis on learning. The necessity to master *kanji* characters, of which there are thousands, has played a particularly effective role both educationally and socially in all nations belonging to the area. With the exception of the China mainland under the socialist regime, the nations in the Confucian Culture Area all boast high levels of general education and high literacy rates, which are ultimately attributable to the Confucian emphasis on education. Accordingly, knowledge intensified soil exists at both central and local levels in present-day Japan. Taiwan, South Korea, and other regions in East Asia. Needless to say, the existence of such a foundation is essential in the development of know-how needed for modernization and industrialization.

The third and most important point is that Confucianism was originally more a code of ethics than a religion. Professor Leon Vandermeersch, after astutely analyzing the essence of Confucianism associated with economic development to be “*famille* (family),” “rite,” and “mandarinate (high-officialdom bureaucracy),” says, “one of the distinctive characters of the Confucian system of communality is being completely free from religious belief.” Because it is not a religion in the strict sense of the word, Confucianism has coexisted in Japan with Shintoism, and in China with Taoism. In other words, Confucianism is an extremely “tolerant” doctrine --- a set of social norms or moral laws rather than a religious faith. This coexistence

with other religions and its own nonrestrictive religious nature are the decisive elements that separate Confucianism from religions such as Islam or Catholicism. And it would seem that this liberal code of ethical behavior, in conjunction with the aforementioned distinguishing traits of Confucian culture and its inherent worldly rationalism, inspires a sense of practical realism and empiricism which serve a major function in laying the foundation for an industrialized society.

In the meantime, there is the famous book *Rongo to Soroban (The Analects of Confucius and an Abacus)* written by the Japanese business pioneer Eiichi Shibusawa, who studied *Sekimon Shingaku*, a new Japanese Confucian school which affirmed the concepts of "ri (profit)" and exerted influence on the *chonin* (townspeople) class in the middle of the Edo Period. The *Shingaku* School also positively re-read *The Analects of Confucius*, removed the Confucian interpretations of the *Chu-tsu* School and found compatibility between *jingi* (a code of conduct) and *fuki* (wealth and high rank). The two ideas of business recognized in this book, i.e., *gili-ryozen* (integrating morality and profit) and *chifu-keikoku* (running the state by achieving wealth) should help to cast new light on the up-to-date framework of the Confucian Culture Area.^{vi}

IV

Needless to say, merely pointing to Confucian cultural influence does not provide all the answers when attempting to analyze the economic and social development of Japan and East Asia.

Concerning Japan, success must be attributed to its total acceptance of modern European ideals, culture, science and technology after the Meiji Restoration, as well as to such basic and logical factors as the domestic reforms implemented after World War II and the enormous influence exerted by contemporary American industrial civilization.

Numerous factors contribute to social and economic development in Japan. But its very flexible nature of Confucian doctrine might promote coexistence with Western individualism in Japan, giving ambiguity of Japanese way of life and thinking. Anyway once the economic take-off has begun, Confucian culture has provided a positive environment for its enhancement with Western Individualism.

In case of Today's Japan, the basic cultural nature of the country is already formed with Confucianism and Western ideals including individualism. Consequently Japanese society will continue future developments on the basis of own culture, blending it with democracy, freedom and the so-called globalism from the Western world.

ⁱ In Japan, "Comparative Studies on Economic and Social Development and Modernization in East Asia" (abbreviated as "Comparative Studies on East Asia") was organized for 1987-1991 headed by Dr. Mineo Nakajima as a large scale joint research project concerning Scientific Research on Priority Areas sponsored by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. See Mineo Nakajima (eds.), *Higashi Ajia Hikaku Kenkyu (Comparative Studies on East Asia)*, JSPS (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science), 1992.

ⁱⁱ See Mineo Nakajima *The Three Chinas: Linkage and Repulsion*, Nihon Keizai Shimbun Sha, 1993.

ⁱⁱⁱ Yoshio Takeuchi, *The Spirit of Confucianism* (in Japanese) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1939), p.213.

^{iv} Kim Il-gon, *Economic Development in East Asia and Confucian Culture* (in Japanese) (Tokyo: Taishukan Shoten, 1992), pp.152-153.

^v Leon Vandermeersch, *Le nouveau Monde sinisé* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986), pp.167-168.

^{vi} On this point, see Mineo Nakajima, "Why the Confucian Culture Area Now?" (in Japanese) *Chuo Kohron*, August 1987.