

Nanami Fujisaki

Saitama University

JAPANESE PEOPLE AND CONFUCIANISM

It is said that many of the Japanese people are polite and kind to others. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan commissioned a survey in 2015 regarding the image of Japan in five countries (the UK, Germany, France, Spain, and Poland), and more than 75% replied that Japanese people are “reliable” or “somewhat reliable” (ibid). Also, roughly 80% of respondents answered that the Japanese are “friendly” or “somewhat friendly” (MOFA of Japan, 2016). From this result, it can be said that Japanese people are seen as courteous and considerate of others from a foreign perspective. This paper analyzes how Japanese national characters were generated from the perspective of Confucianism, one of the disciplines that has greatly influenced the way Japanese people behave and has had a great influence in their way of thinking.

First, the meaning of Confucianism will be explained. Confucianism was founded by Kung Tzu, also known as Confucius in the sixth century B.C in ancient China. In brief, Confucianism teaches that in order to become a person of wide knowledge and high virtue, people should practice the five teachings of Jin(仁), Gi (義), Rei(礼), Chi(智), and Shin (信). Jin(仁) is benevolence, which means being aware of one’s own physical and mental needs and using them to consider the feelings of others (Tsuchida, 2011. p.26). Gi(義) is righteousness, which refers to being orderly and justice (ibid, p.31). Rei(礼) is humbleness, Chi(智) is the ability to make moral judgments (ibid, p.29), and Shin(信) is being true to one’s nature (ibid, p.56).

Also, Chu-ko(忠孝), a combination of loyalty to the master and filial piety to the parents (Tsuchida, 2011. p.35), or Shu-shin(修身), the growing personal morality through daily actions are referred in Confucius’s words (ibid, p.108).

Next, a brief history of Confucianism in Japan will be introduced. Confucianism was brought to Japan in the 6th century by ancient migrants to Japan (Toyama, 2015). Since then, it has been studied and interpreted by various researchers. However, until the 16th century, Confucianism was a knowledge monopolized by a few privileged classes and did not develop at the popular level (Makizumi, 2016, p.178).

From the 17th to the 19th century, there were no major wars in Japan, and academic studies spread to the people. In this context, Confucianism developed as a political philosophy that emphasized harmony and respect for the authorities (Makizumi, 2016, pp.178-179).

In the late of the 19th century, there was a major shifting of the social system. Specifically, the Shogun who ruled Japan at that time was deposed in a revolution and Japanese people and

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society began to interact with the Western world more intensively. Also, ideas of freedom and rights, as well as Western technology were introduced to Japan, and old things and ways of thinking were no longer valued (Makizumi, 2016, p.179). However, Confucianism, the basis of Japanese thinking, was not neglected, but rather used as an ideology to create a centralized country with the emperor at its core (ibid).

Finally, the relationship between the modern Japanese people and Confucianism will be discussed. In present-day Japan, Confucianism has spread as a social ethic (Makizumi, 2016. pp. 180-181, p.187). For example, Japanese people are very punctual and strict in following instructions, which is similar to the teachings of Gi (義) regarding that observing rule. Furthermore, reading between the lines is the very essence of Jin(仁).

However, in my opinion, the spirit of politeness and modesty are rarely practiced with the awareness that “This is a Confucian teaching.” For this reason, Confucianism is a way of thinking that is deeply rooted unconsciously and is one of the factors that make up the Japanese national character.

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