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"Economic Development in East Asia and Confucian Ethics"

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Characteristics among nations

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 particularities. The Chinese prefer long, thick chopsticks which they reuse indefinitely. Japanese tend toward shorter, thinner chopsticks made of natural wood which are disposed after a single use, while Koreans opt for thin, metallic(silver) chopsticks. This same nonuniformity exists in matters of Confucian ethics: each country follows Confucian doctrine according to its own individual interpretations.

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." (7)

While the social emphasis on filial piety has been greatly diminished in modern Japanese society, it continues on in a deeply profound level in South Korea,

where respect for elders remains an ingrained tradition.

Among his five enumerated virtues, Confucius himself assigned 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, stress 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 that the fact the nations of the Confucian Culture Area, as a whole, are experiencing great economic development as present.

Confucian culture and economic development

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 supposition, is the social order based on family collectivism or small groups operating in the society. (8) In his recent book, Professor Il-gon Kim said, "In East Asia, successful development of economy

was brought about by the cultural background of Confucian collectivism which affected the capitalist systems." (9) 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 life-style, 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, and the same process is seen in the case of South Korea's financial institutions as well. 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.

A second distinguishing feature of the Confucian culture Area is its strong emphasis on learning. The necessity to master Kanji characters, 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 on 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 Léon Vandermeersch, after sharply 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." (10) 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 learned Sekimon Shingaku, a new Japanese Confucian school affirming the thoughts of "ri(profit)"

and exerting influence on the chonin(townspeople) class in the middle of the Edo Period, and positively re-read The Analects of Confucius to remove the Confucian interpretations of the Chu-tzu School and consider the jingi(a code of conduct) and fuki(wealth and high rank) compatible. The two ideas of business recognized in this book, i.e., giri-ryozen(integrating morality and profit) and chifu-keikoku(running the state by reaching the wealth) should help to cast new light on the up-to-date framework of Confucian Culture Area.(11)

Conclusion

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 the NICs in East Asia.

Indeed, the economic backwardness of China, North Korea and Vietnam with comparison to Asian NICs might better be understood in terms of the problems inherent in their socialist political systems. 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.

Like this, numerous factors contribute to social and economic development in each countries. But once the economic take-off has begun, Confucian culture definitely provides a positive environment for its enhancement.

NOTES

(1) 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, as a large scale joint research project of Scientific Research on Priority Areas sponsored by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. I was Chief Coordinator for this project.

(2) For example, Mineo Nakajima, "Asia's Prosperity and Confucian Capitalism," PRESIDENT, March 1993.

(3) See Mineo Nakajima, "The Three Chinas in Asia's New Order," Japan Echo, Volume XX, Special Issue, 1993.

(4) Donald P. Dore, Taking Japan Seriously: A Confucian Perspective on Leading Economic Issues (London: The Athlone Press, 1957).

(5) Donald P. Dore, "Confucianism, Economic Growth and Social Development," Paper for The Third General Assembly of "Comparative Studies on East Asia," September 16, 1989.

(6) Japanese translations: By Tsutomu Kajiyama and Hisao Ohtsuka (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1955); By Norio Kimata (Tokyo: Sobunsha, 1971), respectively.

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

(8) On this expression, see Kim Il-gon, "Order and

Economy in the Culture Area (in Japanese) (Nagoya:
Nagoya University Press, 1986), pp. 86-94.

(9) Kim Il-gu, Economic Development in East Asia and
Confucian Culture (in Japanese) (Tokyo: Taishukan Shoten,
1992), pp. 152.

(10) Vanderweersch, Le nouveau Monde
Presses Universitaires de France, 1986).

Analysé
pp. 16 this point, see Mineo Nakajima, "Why Confucian
Area Now?" (in Japanese) Chuo Kohron, August

