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## Confucianism as Cultural Constraint \*

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Due to its uniquely adaptable qualities, Confucianism has survived 2,500 years of history and still exists as the core of morality in Asia, specially in the north eastern part of Asia: China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea and Taiwan. Although there is a tendency recently to attribute Asia's economic success to the moral qualities of Confucianism, the shapes and forms of Confucianism vary greatly. Confucian moral values have developed in different ways through different processes of history in their respective countries, and it thus becomes necessary for researchers to clarify the characteristics of Confucianism in each respective nation.

This study aims at looking into Confucian influences on the behavior of the Japanese, particularly influences on human relationships. Three hypothetical views on Japanese Confucianism are introduced: 1) Confucianism as a framework that determines reciprocal social roles of the people involved. 2) The effect of determined social role as default interpersonal relationship which enables high- context communication. 3) The tight and inseparable combination of moral values with the social structure. Discussion follows here on three of the most influential moral values: loyalty, filial piety and harmony. These values are considered to be working not only as a source of moral qualities but also as expected behavioral codes in different contexts of one's social life. Thus, by focussing on the socio-

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functional aspect of Confucianism, it becomes possible to find and observe its different faces, beginning here with the case of Japan.

## 1. Confucianism as the Determiner of Reciprocal Roles

Confucianism in Japan is not something like the grand philosophy of China or Korea that refers to the metaphysical presence of human beings in the universe. Rather, it has been received as a series of teaching in life that refers to essential moral qualities, which tells us appropriate behaviors in different contexts of our daily life. Loyalty, for example, is defined as the critical value between the lord and the subject, and the government during the pre-war period advocated “loyalty” as the essential morality to be demonstrated for the benefit of the emperor.

Widely accepted Confucian ideas in modern Japan are those of Neo-Confucianism, which have given influence over the life and thoughts of the Japanese at various levels. Among its numerous teachings, there are three categories of teachings referred as 五常 “five fundamentals”, 三綱 “three lines” and 五倫 “five ethics”, which are considered as core values that represent Confucianism.

Five fundamentals are such basic elements as 仁 Jen (benevolence), 義 Gi (obligation), 礼 Rei (propriety), 智 Chi (knowledge), 信 Shin (trustfulness). Three lines refer to basic relationships in life and compare them to a guiding rope such as; lord is a guiding rope for a subject, father for children, husband for wife. Five ethics clarifies the basic relationship between people, such as love between father and children, justice between lord and subject, distinction between husband and wife, and distinctive order between the elderly and the young and trustfulness in between friends.

What is unique to Confucianism is that these core categories not only function as moral rules in life, but also determine people’s roles according to their social relationships. Three lines not only preach the paternal characteristics of a lord to his subjects, of a father to the son and of a husband to his wife, but also define the comparative superiority of the former to the latter and gives reasons for the latter to subdue the former, implying that the latter’s life is dependent on the former’s benevolence ( Jen ). Thus defined, the lord, the father and the husband need to provide necessary caring and support to his people, and in return the people serve them with due loyalty. By listing these three as fundamental relationships in life, Confucianism has successfully done the following:

1. clarified which contexts in life are specially important
2. determined the reciprocal relationship of two people in each respective context
3. determined what moral value is to be expected from one’s counterpart

4. determined what needs to be done in each respective context

These three effects should be considered apart from the moralistic effects of Confucianism. It may well be concluded that Confucianism in Japan functions not only merely as moral qualities, but also as the determiners of one's social relationships and social roles. Therefore, we should define the role of Confucianism in Japan as **a system that determines the reciprocal social relationship and social roles in different contexts of life**. It is amazing to find that the Imperial Rescript of Education perfectly fulfilled this purpose and was used as moral source for more than half a century in pre-war Japan. The Rescript was drafted by Kowashi Inoue (1844-95), the Chief of the Cabinet Legislation Bureau to put the Confucian moral values of five fundamentals and five ethics into education. This inspired loyalty and filial piety of the public to the emperor and eventually put the public into a rigid framework, in which they turned into selfless loyal subjects to the emperor. Quoted below is a part of the Rescript that reflects the values of the five ethics;

Ye, our subjects, be filial to our parents, affectionate to our brothers and sisters; as husbands and wives be harmonious, as friends be true.

In a community like this, individual freedom is allowed only within a range which doesn't conflict with unwritten rules arising from these teachings. There are numerous examples of company business men who had to follow a boss's orders although he knew it was legally wrong. Social role can become very strong and an individual who is ranked lower may have to make bitter choices.

## 2. Rigidity of the Social Relationship and Default Hypothesis

As is cited in the example of the Rescript above, Confucian Five ethics (五倫) seem to carry a significant effect in determining the reciprocal human relationship in the community.

If a college freshman meets his senior in a Judo club, for example, the relationship stays the same throughout the college life and even after graduation. The senior needs to be respected as "senpai"; as the more experienced in life. Thus Confucianism is not only a mere teaching of morality but fixed codes of social behavior determined on the basis of rigid human relationships in the community.

This means that relationships between people are pre-determined and fixed by which context they belong to and by which position they are in in relation with others, rather than by individual interaction or negotiation of the two parties. Furthermore, once those relationships are fixed, there's little possibility for them to become reversed afterward, which means, so long as they stay in the same context, this socio-contextual relationship will stay the same.

Furthermore, if we develop this idea of relational rigidity on each different context a little bit, the following analogy may be drawn.

- In the Confucian community, one's social role is given by default in relation with others even before the meeting.

This function of pre-determining the relationship is considered to affect numerous aspects of Japanese behavior, and can be useful in giving accounts for seemingly mysterious communication styles of the Japanese.

Although it is still very hypothetical, this pre-determining function can be described in a mathematical model as follows. In the case of a father and his son, the default value becomes 'filial piety', which is the expected primary moral value in that particular context.

$$\begin{aligned} Z & \text{ (the most emphasized and expected morality in the context)} \\ & = f \text{ ( the target person's bilateral position / the position you are in)} \end{aligned}$$

- (1) In case of the attitude of a son toward his father, the model illustrates the expected moral quality as follows;

$$\begin{aligned} Z &= f \text{ ( father / self as a son )} \\ &= \text{filial piety} \end{aligned}$$

- (2) If this relationship is focused from the father's side, it becomes like this.

$$\begin{aligned} Z &= f \text{ (son / self as a father)} \\ &= \text{benevolence} \end{aligned}$$

Shown below are other basic relationship in our community

- (3)  $Z = f \text{ ( lord / self as a subject )}$   
= loyalty
- (4)  $Z = f \text{ (subject / self as a lord )}$   
= benevolence
- (5)  $Z = f \text{ ( friends / self as a friend )}$   
= trust
- (6)  $Z = f \text{ ( husband / self as a wife )}$   
= faithful obedience
- (7)  $Z = f \text{ ( wife / self as a husband )}$   
= benevolence

$$(8) Z = f(\text{group / self as a member of a group}) \\ = \text{harmony}$$

The point in applying this model to our daily context is which to be used to account for the target relationship. In the case of a dedicated Japanese worker who sacrifices his weekends for the company, for example, the model of the lord-subject relationship; above (3) will be useful and becomes like this.

$$Z = f(\text{company / self as a worker}) \\ = \text{loyalty}$$

In the case of a student in a classroom, for another example, he has at least two types of relationships he needs to take into consideration: one with the teacher and the other with his classmates. If we put those two variables into the formula, the models will look like this:

$$(9) Z = f_1(\text{teacher / self as a student}) + f_2(\text{classmates / self as a friend}) \\ = (\text{respect and obedience to the teacher}) \text{ and } (\text{harmony with friends})$$

Thus, it becomes visible that students in the classroom are placed in a complicated situation and if they behave in accordance with the Confucian moral codes, it is not necessarily an easy task for them to raise their hands and freely express their opinions.

### 3. The Effect of Default on the Japanese Communication Settings

When it comes to discussing the difference in styles of communication between westerners and Japanese, E. T. Hall's concept of High-context and Low-context continuum is certainly very useful. He notes that the Japanese choose to communicate depending much more on the contextual information and don't usually speak much, while westerners depend very little on the context and thereby verbalize whatever thoughts and feelings they have in the form of words. However, he hasn't given any adequate account on why Japanese do so except to use the term "cultural difference". Now such questions as the following arose.

What is the secret that enables Japanese to carry out a successful communication without speaking much? How can they share so much information without depending on verbal communication? Is it because the Japanese are more sensitive to other people's feelings than westerners? Is it because Japanese are far better at reading minds in communication?

Yes and no and neither are adequate as answers for the above questions. It isn't reasonable to hypothesize any ethnic groups as genetically more sensitive than others. Or the Japanese may have developed unique sensitivity to enable such high-context

communication, but it isn't powerful enough to stand by itself as the reason of Japanese high contextuality.

If we hypothesize that specific behavior or attitude is given by default at the initial stage of communication, it means that the Japanese already know (possess) the appropriate channel for communication in advance and become better prepared for the communication. In other words, the pre-determined social relationship makes a lot of contextual information available to the persons who are engaged in communication. Then, maintaining and finishing communication without spoiling the other's feelings should not be very difficult. If the above hypothesis is applicable to other cases, such as the widely known tendency of the Japanese asking questions about age, marital status and occupation may be because they are seeking for variables to figure out appropriate communication manners in terms of Confucianism.

Throughout a long history, the Japanese have this developed special codes in communication under the influence of Confucianism and are applying those codes in different contexts. They figure out which code to be applied to which context according to the variables provided in the context. And these codes determine the social role of the person with the other. Moreover, an expected attitude is naturally determined. In this way, all Japanese share the same code, which enables them to communicate smoothly. In short, this function of Confucianism for given social roles makes the following things possible in communication. So long as they try their best to fulfill their expected roles, they are able to

1. share a lot of common information as default even before starting the conversation
2. save energy and time to find out about appropriate attitudes for communication with a new person
3. carry out a smooth conversation even with a new person so long as they are aware about their expected roles.
4. avoid risks of wrong behaviors or inappropriate manners

The exception is the case when the Japanese come across somebody from a different cultural context. In other words, once the Japanese are placed in a context where such formulas cannot be applied, they lack the means to find out about the other. If a Japanese looks eccentric abroad with too much of bowing and smiles, that may be the time when they ran out of the ideas. After the surrender to the US occupation army, US soldiers are said to be surprised at the submissive attitude of the Japanese; particularly after the harsh battle in Okinawa. The sudden change of the attitude of the Japanese took place after the emperor's announcement of losing the war, which can

be interpreted as a major shift of context. Both fighting against and accepting the US army with due submissiveness is done on the same moral code: loyalty to the emperor. Once the context is specified, the Japanese seem to apply the most appropriate formula they have and then follow that formula. Their high context communication is not only supported by their cultural sensitivity but also by a culturally pre-determined communication code drawn from Confucianism. Now, three of the moral values cherished in Japan are examined.

#### 4. Confucian Moral Values and Individual: Loyalty and Ego

Loyalty is one of the core moral values considered essential for the establishment of a tight and secure lord-subject relationship. It is a behavioral manner demanded of the subject side and directed to the lord, while the lord responds to the subject's loyalty by extending his benevolence. This benevolence is taken as "On": indebtedness, for the subjects, which in time will become obligation to be repaid to their lord. Thus, loyalty in Japan has existed based on the reciprocity between the lord and subject during the feudal age. The story of the 47 samurai who revenged their master's death on his enemy is still the most popular story among Japanese. These samurai fulfilled their expected roles as subjects in a perfectly acceptable way in the community of those days. Their loyalty is proved not only by the fact that they completed their mission but by the fact that they had been prepared for their suicidal death afterward. Death seems to have been regarded as a supreme form of demonstrating one's loyalty. On the other hand, nothing is more convenient than loyalty for a militaristic government to gain control over the people.

In that sense, it is a natural course that later in the Meiji period; when Shinto and Confucianism were unified for the purpose of building a nation with the emperor at the top of the hierarchy, loyalty was used as a core value that combined the emperor and the people. What does it exactly mean for a person to be loyal? Yamaori says that the Japanese put emphasis on serving the master with a completely selfless attitude: 滅私. In other words, loyalty can never be achieved without the total suppression of your "ego", and there's no space for personal desire to find its place. Therefore, the more difficult it is, the more highly valued it is in the community.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the supreme form

<sup>1</sup>In their case, if we apply the above model, the expected moral behavior can be shown in the following way.

$$Z = f_1(\text{the lord/self as a subject}) + f_2(\text{Shogun / self as a subject}) + f_3(\text{his wife / self as husband}) \\ + f_4(\text{his family/self as caretaker})$$

In order to accomplish their duties arising from different social contexts, they prioritized them. Some first divorced his wife and sent the family back to the wife's parents so that the possible blames and punishment arising from their revenge wouldn't reach them, and after their mission of revenge their lord is completed, they committed suicide to show their faithfulness to Shogun. Thus they cleared all the due work before their

of selflessness becomes suicide in that a person demonstrates his loyalty at the level of even giving up his own life. By killing himself, he proves his faithfulness to the lord.

Among all moral values, in Japan, 忠 chu (loyalty) seems to have the strongest influence, in that the Imperial Rescript of Education's primary purpose was to make loyal subjects. It was used for that purpose for more than half a century until the Japanese lost the war. After the emperor denied himself as a living presence of God, people lost the supreme existence to worship, however, Japanese soon found a replacement in their life: the company. Instead of the state, the company now started to function as a place where people could identify and "Loyalty" was directed to the company in the same manner as people had shown to the state before. The company responded to those hard-working employees by giving life-time employment and generous retirement pay. Applying the previous formula to this relationship, it is shown in the following way:

$$\begin{aligned} Z &= f(\text{company} / \text{self as an employee}) \\ &= \text{loyalty} \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned} Z &= f(\text{worker} / \text{self as president of the company}) \\ &= \text{benevolence} \end{aligned}$$

Considering the close relationship a worker has with his company, it is quite reasonable to say that the concept of 忠 chu (loyalty) has been a central moral value for Japan. In Korea, on the other hand, 孝 kou (filial piety) has been the most emphasized quality because of the great emphasis on the family and ancestors. Moreover, 忠 hasn't been incorporated to nationalism nearly as much as in Japan. If we compare the characteristics of these two countries, we might be able to say that Japan is a Loyalty (忠) oriented country, while Korea is Filial piety (孝) oriented country.

Another negative effect of Loyalty concerns individualism since loyalty denies one's self or ego for the benefit of the lord. There is no space for one's individualism to grow, even if the master permits it with his benevolence. The master's favor of permission, however, turns into "on" and now he owes "giri" to his master. Individualism is placed at the opposite end of loyalty and is regarded as "wagamama," a negative quality, which comes from one's selfishness and is regarded as hindrance for the development of a person and therefore needs to be exempted as much as possible. Every time one shows his ego, Japanese have their behavior criticized as a lack of faithfulness or a lack of thoughtfulness. It is quite understandable that the Japanese become less and less self-expressive.

In conclusion, in a community where such moral values as loyalty are emphasized, the development of individualism tends to be (and needs to be) neglected, and the

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death.

attitudes of expressing one's ideas is very unlikely to grow or be encouraged. Rather, the ability of how selfless one can be for somebody he works for turns out to be very convenient for the rulers ( company presidents!) and has becomes an important basic value in Japan.

## 5. Harmony

The notion of "harmony" first appears in the Seventeen Article Constitution of 604 A.D. an ancient constitution made by Prince Shotoku, who was a faithful scholar of Buddhism and Confucianism.<sup>2</sup> Harmony as morality seems to have two faces. One is the positive side that advocates good teamwork and the necessity of a cooperative attitude within the group. The other is a negative one that is negating nearly all individualistic ideas, opinions and actions. Thus, once the expected social code is found to be "harmony", one needs to hide his own personal desire or ideas and conform to the group. Once 和 "Wa"(harmony) starts to function as negative, it suppresses self and prevents the development of one's ego. It is likely, therefore, that if a child is placed under the continuous pressure of a negative "Wa," the person may not be able to develop the skill of verbalizing his own opinion or in the worst case may even stop pursuing the exploration of his own ego. Such a general tendency with the Japanese as immaturity and lack of self may partly be attributable to this Confucian moral quality of the predetermined nature of social relationships..

## 6. Filial Piety

Filial piety is a behavioral attitude of children to their parents or the elderly that requires them to be aware of the parents' invaluable affection and services, "On" or indebtedness which needs to be repaid in the future, and to be respectful to them. If we examine the socio-functional aspect of this behavior, this moral quality of 孝 contributed to bind individual family members to the family. None can be freed from the indebtedness they owe to their parents, nor can they repay them too much. This indebtedness seems to last even after their deaths. Ancestry worship comes on the extended line of this continuous filial piety. Unity as a family, thus, becomes tight with these unwritten external rules. This moral quality has been strongly maintained in Korea, where kinship is a strong source of ties in the family. In Japan, however, filial piety transformed its shape when the whole nation was interpreted as a family led by the

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<sup>2</sup>Harmony is to be cherished, and opposition for opposition's sake must be avoided as a matter of principle. Men are often influenced by partisan feelings, except a few sagacious ones. Hence there are some who disobey their lords and fathers, or who dispute with their neighboring villages. If those above are harmonious and those below are cordial, their discussion will be guided by a spirit of conciliation, and reason shall naturally prevail. There will be nothing that cannot be accomplished.

emperor in the late Meiji era. All the Japanese public then became children of the emperor. Therefore, the Japanese needed to serve their emperor not only with loyalty but with the filial piety they show to their parents. In this sense, the concept of filial piety was extended and put together with that of loyalty. Watsuji (1935) points out the distinction of filial piety and loyalty, the meaning of filial piety in Japan thus has added to it a nationalistic flavor, while in Korea, on the other hand, the original meaning has been maintained without much change.

## 7. Conclusion

As has been discussed so far, Confucian moral values still affect many different levels of modern life, particularly at the levels of communication styles. Some of these influences can be traced back to the original analects, but others have appeared in the process of their application in each cultural context. Particularly, such negative components as nationalistic loyalty or suppressive rules in a group are considered as examples of twisted application.

The uniqueness of Confucianism can be summarized into three concepts: 1) The definitive nature of expected values in given contexts. 2) The effect of determined social roles as default interpersonal relationships which enables high-context communication 3) The tight and inseparable combination of suggested moral concepts with the social structure and daily contexts.

In western worlds, too, similar moral values are suggested, but it is individuals who decide how to interpret these values and how to apply them to contexts. This means that there is a space for individuals to decide, while Confucianism defines the moral quality to be demonstrated in different social contexts such as father and son, teacher and student, in this sense the Confucian values are very directive.

Such rigid settings for social roles determined by Confucianism and the effects of such moral values as 忠 chu (loyalty), 孝 ko (filial piety) and 和 wa (harmony) have bound individuals to the respective community they belong to, restricting self-expression or individual freedom and enabling Confucianism to survive in the Japanese context. It has thus become clear that Confucianism not only functions as mere moral values but as a key to understanding the Japanese social system and its educational system.

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## **Appendix:**

### **Imperial Rescript of Education (promulgated in 1890)**

Know ye, Our subjects: Our Imperial Ancestors have found 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 the beauty thereof. This is the glory of the fundamental character of Our Empire, and herein also lies the source of Our education. Ye, Our subjects, be filial to our parents, affectionate to your brothers and sisters; as husbands and wives be harmonious, as friends true; bear yourselves in modesty and moderation; extend your benevolence to all; pursue learning and cultivate arts, and thereby develop intellectual faculties and perfect moral powers; furthermore advance public good and promote common interest; always respect Constitution and observe laws; should emergency arise, offer yourselves courageously to the State; and thus guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Throne coeval with heaven and earth. So shall ye not only be Our good and faithful subjects, but render illustrious the best traditions of your forefathers. The Way here set forth is indeed the teaching bequeathed by Our Imperial Ancestors, to be observed alike by Their Descendants and the subjects, infallible for all ages and true in all places. It is Our Wish to lay it to heart in all reverence, in common with you, Our subjects, that we may thus attain to the same virtue.