



Three Strands of Asia
Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat Lecture Series

Lecture Four

**Implications of Confucianism
in Contemporary China, Japan and Korea
June 25, 2014**

Implications of Confucianism in Contemporary China, Japan and Korea

Shin Jeong Geun
Professor of Sungkyunkwan University

The fourth lecture of the Three Strands of Asia dealt with the implications of Confucianism in Contemporary China, Japan and Korea. The lecture was delivered by Professor Shin Jeong Geun of Sungkyunkwan University on June 25. In his lecture, Professor Shin explained how Confucianism, one of the greatest cultural commonalities that three countries share, developed in East Asia over its long history, and suggested his idea on the future prospect of Confucianism that promotes respect for the universal human rights and strengthens the sense of community.

Definition of Confucianism

Confucianism refers to the culture of ideology founded by Confucius who re-interpreted ancient tradition of rituals in scholarly ways. Confucianism features on the rule of noble men based on the view of peace and justice. There are many different branches of Confucianism. Some puts emphasis on the development of mind to control personal interest, while others focus on the production growth and institutional reform to support people's basic needs.

Confucian ethnics permeated all levels of society from realpolitik to ordinary life, and worked as a complex social apparatus. In addition, Confucianism as a modern academic discipline encompasses diverse areas; 1) Philosophy and Religious Studies proposing desirable values which individual and society must pursue, 2) Arts expressing aesthetic sense not bound to personal interest, and 3) Politics and Sociology studying institutions that realize desirable values in the real world.

Historically, Confucianism has enriched and diversified the culture of Northeast Asia by competing against and collaborating with other thoughts including Taoism and Buddhism. Confucianism puts importance on the responsibility of social reform than the search for wisdom leading to individual salvation.

Confucianism has polytheistic and animistic characteristics. It is different from monotheism that assumes the existence of the absolute being who created the world according to one's purpose. Monotheism is characterized by a dualistic world view that separates the world into creator vs created, substance vs phenomenon, judgment vs obedience, and forms vs imitations. Confucianism is based on the tradition of polytheism worshiping ancestor god, nature deities and functional god. In this polytheistic thought, human is one of the principal agent that rules the world along with heaven and earth. Thus people do not solely depend on the absolute being but share the responsibility to optimize one's capacity for solving the real life problems. Some may not recognize the responsibility whereas others may strive to realize such duties of life. Confucianism in this sense emphasizes self-enlightenment to avoid self-indulgence and promote universal responsibility.

Confucianism and Northeast Asia: From 'Introduction Approach' to 'Systemization Approach'

Chinese character and Confucianism are two big commonalities that bind China, Japan and Korea together. People often call this region 'Chinese character/ Confucianism cultural sphere'. Of course there are different opinions on binding three countries in one common cultural sphere. Can Japan be included in Confucianism cultural sphere? Is Korea, where Chinese character is not actively used nowadays, the part of Chinese character cultural sphere?

Despite the differences in opinions, it is hard to deny that Chinese character and Confucianism are common cultures that all three countries share. In addition to this, the three countries worship nature deities, which is connected to another commonality of putting importance on real life success than afterlife salvation.

How did China, Japan and Korea come to share the Confucian culture? Confucianism originated during the warring states period, and was established as the common norm of Northeast Asia during Han dynasty. The spread of Confucianism has been explained in terms of 'introduction of a developed culture'. That is, Chinese Confucianism as a developed culture was introduced to Korea and Japan. This approach may explain the early spread of Confucianism in Northeast Asia. However, it does not provide satisfactory explanation for the development after 1644 (Qing dynasty). In this sense, 'systemization approach' rather than 'introduction approach' can better explain the development of Confucianism in Northeast Asia.

Five Systems and characteristics of Northeast Asian Confucianism

Name of System	Area	Task	Category of Confucianism	Characteristic
6th century BC system	The Yellow River	Respect for the Emperor and expulsion of barbarians	Practicality of Confucianism	Regional Studies
960 years system	Chinese Continent	Unification of China	Sage Learning	Study of Absolute Universalism
1644 years system	Qing, Joseon, Edo	Competition for universality	Studies of Sinic civilization	Study of Comparative Universalism
1894~1895 years system	Nation State	Oppressive 'East Asian Co-Prosperity'	Study of national identity	Discourse of national identity
21C system	Northeast Asia	Intensification of humanities	Confucianism of Humanism	Sense of Community

Confucianism and Contemporary Society

The detailed aspects of Confucian cultures in China, Japan and Korea are different from one another. China and Korea institutionalized the linkage of scholar-government official by state examination. Japan on the other hand improved its Confucian culture by the scholar-warrior linkage.

Moreover, the three countries went through different processes of modernization. The influence of Confucianism started to decline along the process of modernization in Korea, as the kingdom of Joseon, whose final aim was to establish Confucian state, was demolished. It is because Confucianism was considered to be the source that hindered voluntary modernization of Korean nation. Confucianism no longer serves as the political ideology of Korea due to the introduction of liberalism, democracy and parliamentary system. Yet the influence of Confucianism as traditional culture and religious thought is still strong in Korean society.

China reinterpreted Confucianism under the 1894~1895 years system. In 1949, Confucianism was stigmatized as a feudalistic remnant to be eradicated. Under the 21st century system, Confucianism is once again emerging as a value that integrates Chinese economy and society.

With the start of the Meiji Restoration, Japanese warrior elite class of the pre-modern era no longer served the role of maintaining social order. Merchants, the new elite group that led Japan's modernization did not have long-term, stable cultural basis for cultivating Confucian thoughts as the warrior class did. It was *Shibusawa Eiichi* (1840-1931) who contributed to the popularization of Confucianism by his famous book 'The Analects and the Abacus'.

What are the overall influences of Confucianism on China, Japan and Korea? Firstly, Confucianism shaped the world view focused on real life. Secondly, success in real life can corrupt individual, and it is why Confucianism puts emphasis on moral self-discipline that controls lust, corruption and injustice. This engendered a culture that requires high ethical standards of political leaders. Thirdly, benevolence and righteousness of Confucianism created the culture of sympathy that helps others in sufferings of hunger, poverty and disaster.

Q & A

1. Some say that the influence of Confucianism is relatively weak in Japan, and thus Japanese Confucianism is not a genuine one. What is your opinion on this?

As I have mentioned in the lecture, Confucianism went through localization under the 1984~1985 system, creating distinctive tradition of each country. It was the time when Japan combined Confucianism and the Emperor system through the Meiji Restoration. Because of the development of distinguishing traditions, Japanese Confucianism lost the commonality that had long been shared with those of China and Korea. Localization of an imported culture is natural part of the international cultural exchange, and thus we need to respect the distinctive type of traditions developed in each country.

2. You said in the lecture that Confucianism puts emphasis on moral standard of each individual, while Christianity encourages people to behave according to the absolute moral standard made by God. Does it have something to do with the relatively high rate of corruption in East Asia compared to the Western society?

I do not think the rate of corruption is in relation to the difference between Confucian and Christian ethics. I rather believe it is a matter of individual inclination. What would you do if your friend do something wrong? Even under the same Confucian culture, some people might cover the faults of one's friend, and others do not. I would rather say under Confucianism that highlights moral standards of individual, such individual differences stand out.

3. Do you think Confucianism can become a universal value in the future?

Confucianism considers familiar solidarity important, and people might think that Confucian values make only sense among acquaintances. It is true that some of the values of Confucianism as filial piety is bind to familiar solidarity. Yet other values including benevolence, righteousness, propriety and wisdom are universal values that go beyond the boundary of one's family and friends. There are both distinctive and universal values in Confucianism, and thus Confucian ethics has the possibility of universalization in some sense.

4. Some argue that Confucian ethic has been deteriorated in East Asia, as the region went through modernization and westernization. What is your opinion on this?

In this global era, people's mindsets are affected by various cultural strands. Thus, people no longer emphasize single identity and absolute value, but different values and identities are competing against one another in one's mind. In the old days, people were forced to follow the values of Confucianism and Christianity because they were considered to be absolute and universal. Nowadays, people have more freedom in what kind of values to choose, and such values can gain universality if others agree on them.

Lecture Four at a Glance

Common Influence of Confucianism on China, Japan and Korea
1) World view focused on real life: Real life success more important than afterlife salvation
2) Emphasis on moral self-discipline: Requiring high ethical standards of political leaders
3) Culture of sympathy out of benevolence and righteousness

Different Implications of Confucianism on Contemporary China, Japan and Korea			
	Korea	China	Japan
Pre-modern Society	-Confucian culture enhanced by scholar-government official linkage	-Confucian culture enhanced by scholar-government official linkage	-Confucian culture enhanced by scholar-warrior linkage
Modern Society	-Confucianism viewed as an impediment for voluntary modernization of Korean nation -Confucianism as a traditional culture and religious thought	-Reinterpretation of Confucianism under 1894~1895 system -Stigmatization of Confucianism as a feudalistic remnant (1949) -Emergence of Confucianism as a value to integrate China	-Merchant class lacking long-term, stable cultural basis to cultivate Confucian thoughts -Popularization of Confucianism by <i>Shibusawa Eiichi</i>

Three Strands of Asia Overview

	Date	Theme	Speaker
Lecture One	2014.2.13	Written Scripts	Professor Emmanuel Pastreich Kyung Hee University
Lecture Two	2014.3.13	Housings	Mr. Kim Kyung Eun Editor of Kyunghayng Shinmun
Special Lecture	2014.4.14	The Making of Northeast Asia	Professor Kent Calder Johns Hopkins University
Lecture Three	2014.5.20	Court Music	Professor Song Hye Jin Sookmyung Womens' University
Lecture Four	2014.6.25	Implication of Confucianism	Professor Shing Jung Geun, Sunkyunkwan University
Lecture Five	2014.7.17	Tea Cultures	Ms. Muramatsu Kanako Chief Representative, Urasenke Seoul Branch
Lecture Six	2014.9.23	Calligraphy	Mr. Ye Xin Board member, Chinese Culture Center at Seoul



Professor Shin Jeong Geun is the director of the institute of Confucian Philosophy and Culture at Sungkyunkwan University. He is a leading Confucianism expert in Korea who promotes different kinds of activities for enjoying the classics of Eastern philosophy. He provides publics with diverse opportunities to look back upon their lives along with the teachings of Eastern classics including KBS Radio show ‘Classic Sayings related to Current Issues’, and serial article on Naver, ‘Eastern Philosophy Challenging Life to a Duel’.



Three Strands of Asia is the monthly lecture series by the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) started from February, 2014. This lecture series brings together experts of China, Japan and Korea to explain various aspects of the cultures and societies of the three countries from a comparative perspective. This event is aimed at encouraging balanced and thoughtful understanding of the three countries by investigating similarities and differences.

Edited and Translated by: YANG Soo Young