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Neo-Confucianism in Japan: Heritage and Vista

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1.

Civilizations are complex orders, born by people, their cultural and social orders, and nature. The two aspects which are examined here are the mental and material orders brought about in a number of Asian countries under the influence of Confucianism. It hardly needs to be reiterated here that Confucianism appeared in the middle of the first millennium B.C. in China. Major reorientations and reformulations occurred in the Sung and Ming periods in China. They are deemed deep enough to use the term Neo-Confucianism for the teachings which appeared then and later.

Confucian practises and creeds spread to other countries in Asia. There they were developed and modified, and Confucian influences endure to this day. In fact, Confucianism enjoys something of a revival at present. In a number of Asian countries, Confucianism is seen as a credible foundation for their present and future societies (see the discussions in W. H. Slote, ed., 1986).

I argue that Confucianism has played such a role in history before, while going through several changes and renewals. It is evident from its involvement, in the past and the present, with processes of state formation and modernization in East Asia. My material comes from Japan. But to present my conclusion first, Confucianism is to be reckoned among the powerful foundations and forces of modernization in Asia.

Confucianism may be thought of as a single creed, but one containing several teachings and doctrines. When the word is used without qualification, it is to be taken in a broad sense. For example, to differentiate Confucianism from other creeds, such as Buddhism or Christianity; to refer to it as a whole, in acknowledgment of the historic links and family resemblances that exist between its various creeds and teachings; or again, to indicate perceptions and representations on the lay and popular levels.

But no less, Confucianism passed through several phases along with social changes and transformations. Enduring, it came to consist of a number of doctrines, teachings and schools. Therefore it is at times necessary to refer to particular schools and teachings by name.

From the viewpoint of an anthropologist, as from that of a doctrinal historian, one unit in studying Confucianism is the constellation of a teacher and his students,

their patrons, and such supporters and opponents as they met in their lives and times. Another is to look at the institutional frameworks which Confucianism took part in shaping.

The various schools and teachings appeared in different periods of time and social development in these societies, and found support and met with opposition from different social groups. And this has affected the courses of their histories.

After the centennial of the Meiji Restoration had been celebrated, Ouwehand opened his review of a number of commemorative studies with the remark that in the 1970s, the Restoration was no longer thought of as the prime mover of the modernization that followed, but rather, as the consequence of processes that had started centuries earlier [OUWEHAND 1972: 120]. Certainly, few would challenge this assertion today.

It is my contention that Confucianism is elemental among these forces. It furnished decisive foundations and aptitudes: material, in the form of social, economic and political orders; mental by way of moral, intellectual and emotional orders. This has helped Japanese, and others in confucianized Asian countries, to withstand and match other forces, in the region and from further afield.

In these situations, Confucianism has provided and maintained some crucial elements of mental and social order. Vis-à-vis other ideational system and forms of social life, from the East or the West, it gave independent and matching orientations, and the moral and intellectual capacities to exercise them, showing their worth and viability.

Along with political pragmatic traditions, there are traditions of idealism and activism in Confucianism. For China, Confucianism has been recognized as a force of humanism and emancipation [HUCKER 1966; TU 1986], no less, than one of a ceaseless arbitrary and bureaucratic rule [BALASZ 1968]. In Japan, Najita (1974) saw the tensions between the two as an inherent opposition, among those who practiced "pragmatic bureaucratism" (*kanryōshugi*), and those who relied upon "intuitive idealism".

Many have pointed to this tension. Schwartz (1959) called them "polarities", while Nivison (1960) looked at it as "protest against conventions and conventions of protest". Sagara (1965, 1966, 1979) has pointed to a shift in meaning and behaviour occurring over the Tokugawa period, one away from formality and respect (*kei*) towards spontaneity and sincerity (*sei*). Gluck (1985) says "strains"; Boot contrasts the pragmatic with the endeavor to establish a *diesseitige heilstaat*, a millennium in this world in Neo-confucianism [BOOT 1985: 12].

One should study these tensions and forces, the better to be informed about the way they have influenced processes of civilization and state-formation in Japan and East Asia. Some idealistic elements are an imperative and leverage for rebellion, leading to action to redress the ills of the hour or the regime [VAN BREMEN 1984]. But all give directions to achieve self- and social transformations. Najita has placed the idealistic tradition in innate opposition to pragmatic bureaucratism, finding that they tended to clash, over and again, in "restoration movements" in Japan.

Before I turn to Neo-Confucianism, and Wang Yang-ming persuasions, however, I skim the history of Confucianism in Japan, in order to sketch its role in the social formations and transformations, that are the basic subject of this paper.

2.

Confucian influences became apparent in Japan, at least as early as the 7th century A.D., and clearly in state and mental formation. Until late in the 12th century, patrons were found at court and in the capital. Then, military houses and Buddhist establishments joined as supporters, and from the 17th century, the house of the Tokugawa, the various domains, and temple schools carried it further. In addition, in the Edo period private academies made their appearance. These new and consequential institutions taught commoners alongside members of the military elite: members of the professional classes, and members of the urban and rural elites. Nakae Tōju, the “founder” of Wang Yang-ming studies in Japan, is said to have been among the first to establish the private academy in Tokugawa Japan.

From the Meiji period, through compulsory education and military conscription, the central government, along with semi-governmental and voluntary organizations, and in part the press, carried it further, and spread Confucianism to the inhabitants of the country. Confucian teachings permeate the “civil theologies”, formulated and clarified by scholars and intellectuals, such as Motoda Eifu, Nishimura Shigeki, Inoue Tetsujirō (1900), Watsuji Tetsurō (1974), Tsuda Sōkichi (1938).

Masters and incidents from Japanese Wang yang-ming Confucianism are well-represented in modern Japanese literature. A conspicuous example is Ōshio Heihachirō, and the modern historical fiction written about him and his rebellion. It goes from Mori Ōgai (1971) to writers of today [MIYAGI 1977; OKADA 1977]. Najita said of this truly massive literature and fiction about Ōshio Heihachirō: “Ōshio was a sage in his day, a hero for later generations ... an idealized personality with a set of ethical precepts enticing even to men in the modern era” [NAJITA 1970: 155–6].

Much the same can be said for others: Saigō Takamori [KAIONJI 1969], Yoshida Shōin, and obscurer heroes [SHIBA 1964, 1979]. Enticing to men in the modern era, generation upon generation then. It sheds light on the problems presented by a terminology that separates too strictly past from present, tradition from modernity.

Confucianism largely became covert with this wide dissemination [DEVOS 1986]. It has become a part of what is “normal”, and “Japanese”. It is still the subject of popular guides, such as a *Yōmeigaku nyūmon* [GOTŌ 1974] and a *Nihon bushidōshi* [MORIKAWA 1973]. Confucianism is still studied, discussed, read, and passed on through scholarship, literature, journalism, politics, at the shop floor, in the office, in the household, in art and entertainment, through drama, ideology, and religion. Also books written by scholars about Confucianism and Wang Yang-ming, aimed at the general public, keep appearing [ŌNISHI 1979; YAMASHITA 1984].

Perhaps one could read Japanese folklore studies as records of the ever shrink-

ing areas where state penetration was weak or had only just begun. To study Japanese culture less these influences, folklorists and ethnologists had to resort to history and to peripheral areas already in the 19th century. Their studies could provide the outlines of a map and be a measure of the pervasion of Confucianism in modern times in Japan.

3.

Confucianism has repeatedly come to the fore in times of change and crisis, guiding re-orientations and struggles for power. I contend that in these processes and situations, Confucianism furnished many a functionary and activist with the material and mental means to confront the situation. It provided options that enabled policy, shaped attitudes, and advised transitions, by providing administrative instruments, guidelines for orientation and models for action.

I venture two suppositions. First, that Confucianism functioned, on the one hand as a buffer, but on the other hand also as a conductor, mediating between constraints domestic and foreign, antiquated and modern, familiar and unknown. In part, such a function can be ascribed to state Shintō also.

Second, it seems that sectarian Shintō, popular Buddhism, so-called new-religions, eschatological and millenarian movements, ideological and extremist movements, also functioned as buffers and conductors, now accommodating people in their daily lives to the changes affecting them, and helping them to accommodate or dispute and oppose them. Neo-Confucian influences are visible on these levels, too. Tenrikyō is an example of an upholder and accommodator, while men like Nakano Seigō [NAJITA 1971] or Mishima Yukio [KLOPFENSTEIN 1972], are examples of fighters.

4.

In order better to understand Confucian influences in modern Japan, I attempted to trace some of the Neo-confucian influences, specifically Wang Yang-ming strains, which I found in popular perceptions and social dissent in the 1960s and 1970s [VAN BREMEN 1984]. Looking in particular at Japanese masters and their followers, the question was how and why they affected the popular imagination and led to action, and how and why they moved the behavior and consciousness of several people in the present and the past.

I sought the answers by linking several realms. They range from the masters of the "Great Tradition" to lay masters in the "Little Tradition", including prosaic practitioners, as well as the popular and religious portrayals of these persons, their teachings and deeds.

Some Wang Yang-ming adepts have found a place in Japanese pantheons, some officially condoned, and others without the blessing of the state, but with that of members of the public. They are venerated, and in a few cases practically deif-

ied. A successive number of people have continued to follow these examples as representations of virtue, courage, strength, and righteousness. To others, they epitomize recklessness, unpredictability, and even madness. They are seen as leaders of the nation, guardians of heritage and traditions, noble saints, or champions of the people by some, and yet again others deem them dangerous and unpredictable, mere adventurers or mad fanatics. But most consequential, these models continue to inspire people.

Adorned with these qualities, these figures have something of the "culture hero", or the "trickster". In these guises they seem super-human. The figures of trickster and hero materialize across the range of human societies. The place and role of these actors and their representations in consciousness, action, and transformations, such as state formation, civilization, or modernization, need to be more fully understood.

5.

Japan has been the recipient and guardian of Wang Yang-ming Confucianism, as indeed, of Zen Buddhism. The rediscovery of Wang Yang-ming in 20th century China, was understood in the Netherlands as a function of Japanese enthusiasm. There was a lively interest in Confucianism in the 19th and early 20th century in Japan, which spilled abroad into Asia along with the country's success as a modernizing nation. J. J. L. Duyvendak a Leiden sinologist, was in China in the 1920s, and he remarked to the Japanese enthusiasm, that Wang Yang-ming was "le livre de chevet of all Japanese officers, the men of Port Arthur, of Mukden! Admiral Tōgō himself was one of his most staunch admirers" [DUYVENDAK 1933: 64].

There is enough evidence to conclude that Duyvendak saw that right. Chiang Kai-shek, for example, first was captivated by Wang Yang-ming during his stay in Japan [LOH 1971; SHIMADA 1967: 125]. His adversary, Mao Tse-tung, was also influenced by Wang [WAKEMAN 1973].

Anthropologists can add insight into that complex of inclinations and ideas, in which Confucian teachings or elements blend. Confucians are, after all, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, or Vietnamese. That taken into account, it is easy to see, that there are many influences at work. All form and dominate the perceptions and behavior of such individuals, and influence their sentiments, behaviour and ideas [DEVOS and SOFUE 1984; SLOTE, ed. 1986].

6.

Neo-Confucians belief that people and the world can be governed, even made. If properly understood and practiced, the person, the family, the community, society, the state and even the cosmos, are subject to a set of constituent forces, among which virtue and effort are central. The so-called "investigation of things", is a key and guide to Neo-confucians, although they differ in the way they go about it.

A leading direction in Neo-confucianism is the school of "principle" (Japanese: *ri*). It is associated with the discovery and exercise of principles and laws, and is chiefly represented by Chu Hsi. The school of "intuition" (Japanese: *shin*) is another. It is identified with immediate insight and action, springing from the spontaneous knowledge of right and wrong, which is gained by means of self-cultivation and guided by innate intuitive insight. It is foremostly embodied by Wang Yang-ming and followers of his persuasion.

The notion that the world can be influenced and controlled through correct investigation and knowledge of the right practice and behaviour, informs prevailing notions of "modernity". But the idea that the world is controllable through such means, is maintained by people the world over, pre-civilized and civilized. One can question the value of the division of societies into "traditional" and "modern", when it is based on that ground.

The idea that the world can be controlled through ever increasing amounts of, and ever changing approaches to knowledge and control, seems more truly modern. But it is also present in Neo-confucianism. Thus, the idea that novelty and change are always part of existence does not distinguishes "modern" from "pre-modern," either. Disagree with Confucius, take into account the present state of circumstances, rely on insight over the handbook, these and similar instructions are stressed and passed on in the teachings and practise of Wang Yang-ming and others.

In the ritual and religious life of many peoples, including the Japanese, the consciousness exists that there are different levels of reality, and of change and perpetuity. It comes to the fore, for example, in the ritual marking and passing of stages in personal, group, and natural life.

Notions such as "modern" and "traditional" are composites of many elements and characteristics. They have a polythetic nature. In truth, they consist of constituents which are related and articulated in a complex fashion [GODELIER 1973]. The division and naming of time and social formations is a difficult and precarious operation. Analyses of societies and histories in terms of static dichotomies, and undifferentiated notions of time and consciousness, simplify reality to the point of misrepresentation. It is better to work ideographically and comparatively, and use synthetic concepts and models [VERRIPS 1988].

7.

It is not an overstatement to say that Confucianism has decisively shaped a number of societies in Asia, and that it continues to do so, albeit mostly covertly. It is a form of civilization in which people with certain qualities and functions are produced and will produce themselves. The production and reproduction of a Confucian society is handled by the person, the family, the community and the state. The order is built on a number of clearly defined roles and relationships, corresponding rites and virtues, and a complex of affects, motivations, behaviors, representations, and conceptions about human and cosmic life. Although much has been

made of the distinctions between intellectual and physical work, it does not appear to be of equal importance to every school. Certainly, it is not strongly stressed in Wang Yang-ming traditions. Self-cultivation and the exercise of intuitive knowledge appear to be fundamental.

Reference to Confucian ideas about the cosmos and its perceived congruence with humans and nature is made here with special intention. Under the influence of modernization theories, some declared Confucianism a secular and cerebral system of thought. A champion of the rationalist point of view was Carson Chang (1957; 1962). Others denied it, and exhibited religious elements. The rational version was replaced with a more religious one by Yamashita (1971), for instance, and with a developmental psychological and ethical approach by Tu (1976, 1986). The strength of primordial sentiments has been demonstrated by McMullen (1975; 1987).

It is interesting to recall that Evans-Pritchard defined "the elimination of the self, the denial of individuality" as religious [EVANS-PRITCHARD 1984: 64]. But rather than argue for or against and to little avail, I would appraise Confucianism in its constituents and complexities, and pay attention to the various attachments of and compulsions exerted upon the followers and the general population.

8.

I noted Confucianism in Japan for its role in history, but no less interesting are the manifestations in the present. In the 1960s and 1970s, certain persons and occurrences drew attention. Mishima Yukio (1971), for instance, who then wrote the treatise, "Wang Yang-ming doctrine as a revolutionary philosophy" (Kakumei te-tsugaku toshite no Yōmeigaku).

Hayashi Fusao (1975) defended Japan as a sovereign civilization in *Apology of the War in Greater East Asia* (Daitōa sensō kōteiron). He wrote a long series of books about Saigō Takamori, amounting to 22 volumes. There is more material which affirmed the presence of Wang Yang-ming Confucianism in Japan, and the link between the past and the present, on the levels of the Great and the Small Traditions.

Japanese reformers have commented on the alleged influence of Yōmeigaku in Japan at several times. Uchimura Kanzō (1861–1930) wrote in *Representative Men of Japan* (Daihyōteki Nipponjin), that under the influence of Wang Yang-ming philosophy, the Japanese people were not timid, afraid, conservative, or reactionary when confronted with the modern challenge, but ready to do battle and achieve modernization. One finds this image presented also, by Matsumura Kaiseki, educator and leader of the Society of the Way (Dōkai). Neo-Confucianism was a model for action and a source of intellectual, psychological and emotional confidence and strength for many before and since the Meiji Restoration, and it should inspire the Japanese now [MATSUMURA 1940].

This power was perceived by some foreign observers. Brinckley, for instance,

believed that Neo-confucianism kept the Japanese elite from converting to Christianity; but he admired and valued Wang Yang-ming and the Japanese followers [BRINKLEY 1902: 127-8].

Yet it helped others to convert to Christianity. Members of the so-called Kumamoto band turned Protestant against the wishes of their families. They justified their decision by referring to Wang Yang-ming's doctrine of intuitive knowledge.

Others, it helped to break away from Christianity again. After years of conversion, Matsumura Kaiseki (1940) renounced Christianity on account of the superiority of Eastern thought.

Earlier, the late Edo period scholar Sakuma Shōzan entertained much the same ideas. His creed became the slogan, "Western technology, Eastern morality" (*wakon yōsai*). This opinion and attitude prevailed. It is evident from the Confucian influence in schools; the armed forces, factories, firms, government bureaucracies. Significantly, right after the Second World War, Confucianism again informed the administrative, educational, economic and domestic domains [DORE 1952]. These questions are again at the forefront of debate, in universities, in and ideological and moral debates taking place in some of the newly industrializing countries.

9.

Often the question reappears, what are the relations and influences of major doctrines and religions to societies and civilizations? What of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism? And what are their relationships to the processes called modernization?

Confucianism was appraised here for similarities and differences with the systems and mentalities considered modern, when in fact often western. The most striking distinction is, that in the Confucian assessment of what is human, *moral* qualities and self-effort predominate. In the West, it said to be the power of language and reason [LEACH 1986: 96]. Both have produced humanist traditions.

Questions such as these must be studied through actual cases. The field of ethnographic study (*ethnografisch studieveld*) is one approach. It can yield insights and generate useful questions about culturally and historically related societies under the influence of a great tradition [OOSTEN 1985, 1987]. The Confucian realm can be regarded as such a field in Asia.

Concern over the betterment of the human condition, the achievement of good social orders, control over social problems, and insight in fundamental social processes, make the study of Confucian civilizations a timely subject. Confucianism reveals thoughtful models of society, and cases of actualization in historical and contemporary times and circumstances.

Can one pose the questions as Max Weber and others did, when they assessed the relationships of religion and ideational systems to modernization? Did Confu-

cianism, for instance, contribute to a secular and rational view of society and the world? Have the secular and the rational been the sole foundations and driving spirits in modernization and in modern societies? Can one analyze and understand the processes and their outcomes in these terms? Are they the right processes to study?

The questions and answers have been formulated differently. Often, they explained and departed from a Western perspective. But also in the West, attempts have been made and pressures felt to break free from Europe-centered limitations. In the Netherlands, contributions have been made by anthropologists, historical-sociologists and others [VAN DEN MUIJZENBERG & WOLTERS 1987].

In Europe, America, and Asia, approaches and comparisons from and with Asian countries have been chosen. The study of endogenous drives toward modernization deserves great care and attention.

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