

CHAPTER 7

Historical and Cultural Features of Confucianism in East Asia

CHEN Lai

ALTHOUGH IT ORIGINATED in China, Confucianism has spread far and wide across the East Asian Sinosphere. In the long process of its historical and cultural development, due to different geographical, historical, and social conditions, and to the different dispositions of each country, Confucianism in China, Japan, and Korea has formed its respective features. Generally speaking, compared to Chinese Confucianism, Korean Confucianism in theory is more internal and abstract (e.g., in the distinction of the Four Sprouts [*sidian* 四端] and the Seven Emotions [*qiqing* 七情]), while Japanese Confucianism shows more external and concrete features.¹ However, what I am concerned with in this chapter are the following questions: What, respectively, was the ethos of Confucianism in China, Japan, and Korea before the nineteenth century? And connected with this, what were their respective axiologies? Or, what are the value principles that predominated in each of these Confucianisms?

Among the comparative Asian cultural studies in recent years, especially those on East Asian Confucianism, the research of Mizoguchi Yūzō demands our special attention. Not only was he familiar with the contemporary thought of both Chinese and Japanese, but his writings also evidence broad views and deep insights in his own thinking. His thought shows a universal axiological concern that greatly enlightens those of us in comparative Confucian studies.² The main arguments of the present chapter are, briefly, as follows. Among the virtues that are advocated by Confucianism, viewed from the value orientation of social life, we can say that Chinese Confucianism emphasizes consummate persons/conduct (*ren* 仁), while it is appropriateness (or *yi* 义) that is empha-

sized in Korean Confucianism and doing one's utmost or showing loyalty (*zhong* 忠) in Japanese Confucianism. Or, taking a closer look, we can say that Chinese Confucianism emphasizes putting oneself in the other's place (*ren* and *shu* 恕), while it is appropriateness and temperance (*jie* 节) in Korean Confucianism and loyalty (*zhong* 忠) and bravery (*yong* 勇) in Japanese Confucianism. These differences in emphasis in the different countries are not only axiological but also cultural. The conclusions we might draw in East Asian cultural comparative studies not only emerge at the level of canonical literature and philosophy, but also from studies in sociology and anthropology.

I

The idea of *renai* 仁爱 ("consummate persons/conduct" or "benevolence and love") lies at the core of ancient Chinese Confucian cultural ideals. It can be traced back to the early idea of "protecting the people" in China. The *Shangshu* says, "Deal with them [the people] as if you were protecting your own infants, and the people will be tranquil and well."³ Not only is this a political idea, but it also has ethical and axiological import. The *Shangshu* especially attaches great importance to protecting the old, the weak, the orphaned, and the young. It is said in the *Shangshu*, "Do not despise the old and experienced, and do not make light of the helpless and young."⁴ Also it is said that one should "not dare to treat with contempt widowers and widows."⁵ This special concern for old widows and widowers, and orphans as well, is the initial expression of a Chinese humanism. Actually, the true meaning of filial piety (*xiao* 孝) should be understood from this perspective. Filial piety is the cherishing of, and repaying of affection to, one's parents. It is the root not only of *ren* but also of its practice. This is why Cheng Yi 程頤 (Yichuan 伊川) says, "To practice *ren* one should start with *xiao* 孝 and *ti* 悌 ['filial piety' and 'love of one's elder brothers']. *Xiaoti* is one important event (*shi* 事) in the practice of *ren*."⁶

For Confucius, the most significant meanings of *ren* are expressed as follows: "Loving people"; "consummate persons wishing to be established themselves seek also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged themselves they seek also to enlarge others"; and also "Do not do to others what one would not wish done to oneself."⁷ For Confucius, *ren* has become a universal ethical principle. Hence, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* reports that Confucius values *ren*, and Mozi values indiscriminating love.⁸ Confucius takes *ren* as the highest ideal principle while Mozi takes indiscriminating love as the highest principle. Even Laozi raised similar ideas. He states, "I have three precious things that I prize and hold fast. And the first of these is *ci* 慈." *Ci* means compassion and love. In this sense we can say that these three important early Chinese thinkers all affirmed the significance of *renai* in different ways.

In the Warring States period, Mencius proposed the idea of loving the people and things (*renmin aiwu* 仁民愛物). Zhuangzi's Huizi went further and evoked the idea of "overflowing in love for the ten thousand things, and becoming one body with the heavens and earth,"¹⁰ an idea that has had a great influence on later Confucianism. This is why *ren* has risen to the most important position in Confucianism since the Tang dynasty. Han Yu 韓愈 said, "Broad love is *ren*";¹¹ Zhangzai 張載 stated that "the people are my siblings and things are my friends";¹² and Cheng Hao 程顥 claimed that "consummate persons are one with the heavens and the earth and the ten thousand things."¹³ Cheng Yi once pointed out that "The primordial source of the four virtues is the *ren* of the five constant virtues (*wuchang* 五常). Specifically, *wuchang* refers to the virtue of *ren* itself; generally speaking, *ren* can include the other four virtues."¹⁴ Zhu Xi also maintained that the *ren* of the four virtues (*ren* 仁, *yi* 義, *li* 禮, and *zhi* 智) can "include everything," and that "the heart-mind of compassion runs through everything."¹⁵ These are all explicit examples that *ren* has been taken as the predominant principle of Confucianism. Even in the 1980s Li Zehou still used "studies of *ren*" (*renxue* 仁學) to reference Confucianism.¹⁶

As we have seen above, the Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties used *ren* to unify and designate the four virtues. In fact, in Chinese Confucianism, *ren* has a special connection with the values of love (*ai* 愛), harmony (*he* 和), generosity (*shu* 恕), and impartiality (*gong* 公), which taken together constitute the dominating axiology of Chinese Confucianism. These values have formed a dynamic correlation with the social regime in history, and are embodied in the everyday conduct of the people.

In his significant sociological work titled *Essentials of Chinese Culture*, Liang Shuming points out that *ren* is an ethical sentiment whereby people express concern for others, while with desires there is only concern for oneself. He states, "In short, what an ethical society values is respect for others. . . . Moral relations are deontological relations, in which one seems not to exist for oneself but rather for one another."¹⁷ Liang therefore summarizes Confucian ethics as "valuing one another." This is a conclusion that emanates from his social practice of rural reconstruction. It can also be viewed as a development of the Qing Confucian Ruan Yuan's interpretation of *ren* as respect for each other (*xiang/renou* 相人偶). According to Liang, after the Duke of Zhou and Confucius proposed the moral ideal of *ren*, China was gradually transformed from a feudal society into an "ethical society."

This change can be illustrated by the following example. Consider two brothers growing up following their natural sentiments in one family with the same parents. One might wonder what would be the difference in their rights to inheritance. In feudal society, however, once they grew up and came to inherit the property of their parents, they would each face a different treatment. The

elder brother would inherit both the official titles and the property while the younger brother would get nothing.

With respect to the origins of primogeniture, Henry Sumner Maine once pointed out a principle in his work *Ancient Law* that whenever the inheritance system has to do with the political system, primogeniture necessarily emerges.¹⁸ Generally speaking, feudal structure and patriarchal order are established according to the political and economic needs of the time. Yet the community life of a super-family has such great power in suppressing family affections that even when it is unnecessary to hold on to primogeniture it nonetheless exists as before within the tradition. Before World War II, I went to visit some Japanese villages and saw something called “primogen-school.” Puzzled, I asked the local people and was told that the rural fields are inherited only by the first son, and no one else can claim them. The other sons usually go to the urban centers to make a living, while the first sons stay in the countryside, giving rise to different educational needs. This phenomenon shows that their culture is not far removed from the feudal society and that the old customs still prevail. In fact, this custom was also preserved in European countries up until modern times.

Only China is different. In China, the inheritance was evenly split among all sons. According to Liang Qichao’s *History of Chinese Culture*, the fact that this inheritance system lasted for almost two thousand years is not a minor matter, nor was it merely accidental. Its consequence was to dissolve the unnatural feudal order by bringing out the natural emotions and sensibilities of the human being. This is a salient example of morality replacing feudality.¹⁹

Seen from Liang Shuming’s perspective, the emergence of *ren* represents the “reasonable early maturity” of Chinese culture. The reason I talk about this here is that it is similar to Max Weber’s “axiological rationality.” Not only has it greatly influenced China’s social regime but it has also helped to direct the overall trajectory of Chinese history.

II

The anthropologist Ruth Benedict, famous for her studies in Japanese culture and axiology, held that *ren* never gained the high position in Japan that it has had in China. In her studies of the idea of gratitude (*baoen* 报恩) toward the emperor and one’s parents, she points out that this gratitude is an infinite, unconditional obligation, and that it is more absolute compared to the Chinese idea of duty to one’s country and filial piety to one’s parents. Although both ideas of loyalty (*zhong* 忠) and filial piety (*xiao* 孝) come from China, they are not unconditional in China: “A virtue dominating all others is established in Chinese thinking. That is *ren*.”²⁰ She remarks that the rulers in China have to practice *ren* or else they legitimate rebellion against the throne. However, “This

Chinese moral idea has never been accepted by the Japanese. In fact, in Japan *ren* has been excluded from the ethical system, holding no lofty position as it does in China.”²¹

Robert Bellah believes that in premodern Japan the idea of loyalty to one’s superior has dominated all other moral ideas and was viewed as the core value and first virtue during the Edo period:²²

As we see, in Japan the idea of loyalty has permeated the whole society and become the ideal of all classes, although in China it is even difficult for it to be applied to the scholar class (*shi* 士). It only applies to the officials.²³

According to this theory, the dominant value and principle in premodern Japanese Confucianism and Japanese culture was loyalty (*zhong* 忠), under which a person’s commitment to some specific system or group trumped his or her commitment to universal values (e.g., justice, expansive love, and so on).

Actually, what needs to be stressed here is that this value orientation that was formed during the Edo period was tightly connected with the social structure of Japan at that time. The most important two points are as follows. First, Japan during the Edo period was a feudal society, similar to China’s Spring and Autumn Period, when loyalty was the ethical embodiment of this type of society. Second, the Samurai class was the social foundation during the Edo period. This was completely different from the Chinese and Korean political structure with the literati (*shi* 士) as the social foundation. Although the Samurai class was the ruling class during the Edo period, Samurai nonetheless had no land of their own. So it was crucial for them to be loyal to their lord. While practicing Confucianism, the Samurai class formed the Confucian value orientation unique to the Japanese.

Because his research centered on sociology and history, Mizoguchi Yūzō was not interested in pure philosophical analysis. Mizoguchi had deep insights into the axiological principles of China and Japan. As he points out, Darwin’s theory of evolution and Spencer’s theory of social evolution in the West have been developed into Yan Fu’s *Tian yanlun* 天演论 (theory of evolution) in China, generating a strong impact on modern Chinese intellectuals, for whom the competition for existence, “the survival of the fittest,” “natural selection,” and “the law of the jungle” are the principles of progress. However, China has had to undergo a fundamental change in its worldview in order to accept this “law of the jungle.” This is because the world of *ren* (benevolence), *yi* (appropriateness), *li* (rituality), and *zhi* (wisdom) has been viewed as the world of humanity in China ever since the Song dynasty, while the “law of the jungle” is viewed as representative of the world of animals. In ancient China, property

is evenly distributed, vocations are not inherited, the communal fields (*yitian* 义田), and communal villages (*yizhuang* 义庄) are everywhere, and communal life is viewed as virtuous. Accordingly, the established principles that dominate both the ethics and social structure of China are anathema to the “law of the jungle.”²⁴

Mizoguchi also underlines the fact that there is a big difference between Japan and China. Japan during the Edo period was a hierarchical society based on the right of primogeniture. For this reason the sense of private property and class consciousness were developed at that time and became the ground for adopting the principles of competition. On the other hand, when Confucianism was adopted by the Samurai class during the Edo period, bravery (*yong* 勇) was already accepted as an important virtue on a par with *ren*. Yet at the same time in China, both Chen Chun’s *Beixi ziyi* and Dai Zhen’s *Commentaries on Mencius* did not mention the virtue of bravery (*yong*), while in Ogyū Sorai’s *Distinguishing Names* the virtues of bravery (*yong*), valor (*wu*), firmness (*gang*), strength (*qiang*), and fortitude (*yi*) were listed. This, Mizoguchi thinks, is why

Japan has fertile ground for accepting the law of the jungle concerning its philosophical and ethical tradition. On the contrary, China not only has no such ground but rather has a contrary ground of principles.²⁵

Indeed, loyalty, valor, and fortitude were significant virtues for the Samurai Confucians in Japan, which reflects the characteristics of the social structure and the needs of the Edo period. Even though there were scholars such as Yamazaki Ansai 山崎暗斎 and Itō Jinsai 伊藤仁斎 who underscored *ren*, they nevertheless emphasized only personal moral practice, and denied *ren* as a universal principle and thus its transcendental nature. For this reason, concerning their respective orientation of values, it is a simple fact that Japanese Confucianism cannot be summarized as the study of *ren* as it is in China.²⁶

III

The ethos of Korean Confucianism is closely connected with the development of Korean history. The constant literati purges of the Joseon dynasty had great influence on the morale of Korean Confucians. These purges (in 1498, 1504, 1519, and 1545) led to great political persecution and the slaughter of Confucians—a rare phenomenon in other East Asian countries. The *shi-lin* school formed by the Confucians called for social reform and advocated social justice, and had thereby fallen into conflict with the *jiuxun* school, which represented the interests of the nobility. However, the tragic deaths of these famous Confucians subsequently served to fire the unyielding *daoyi* 道

义 spirit of Korean Confucianism. In the words of Zhao Guangzu, “Without regard for personal danger, dedicated to the public enterprise, this is the spirit of true literati.” Thus, we can say that “righteousness” or “appropriateness” (*yi* 义) is the basis for the spirit and principle behind Korean Confucianism. As Liu Chengqiang has pointed out, “the *daoxue* school’s spirit of justice (*yi*) illuminated through the literati purges and sacrifices reveals the specific feature of Korean Confucianism.”²⁷

Yi is the persistence of moral convictions. Confucianism in the Joseon dynasty strictly distinguished appropriateness (*yi*) from inappropriateness (*buyi* 不义), and appropriateness from selfish interests (*li* 利),²⁸ and this has a lot to do with Korea’s history of constantly being invaded by other countries. For example, during the Goryeo era Korea was invaded by the Khitans and the Mongolians, and during the Joseon dynasty by the Japanese and then by the Manchus. In 1592, Toyotomi Hideyoshi attacked Korea. With the Confucians as their moral center, Koreans organized military volunteers, and this further inspired a spirit of loyalty (*chunghyo jeongsin* 忠孝精神) among the Korean people. In the course of this national battle many Confucians sacrificed their lives for their country, demonstrating a strong spirit of loyalty and righteousness (*zhongyi* 忠义) and patriotism, and thus earned the praise of the people. In 1636, Emperor Huang Taiji led a large army in an attack on Korea, and the latter was forced to sign a treaty surrendering to the Qing dynasty and breaking off with the Ming. Korean Confucians opposed to the surrender were executed. This opposition exemplifies how invasions from other countries have aroused the spirit of justice among Korean Confucians.

In this way the emphasis on justice and loyalty has set the tone for Korean Confucianism. Concerning its intellectual resources, Korean Confucianism was able to take the idea in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* of “distinguishing the great *yi*” and develop it into a national spirit of rebellion against injustice and resistance to aggression. This spirit of Korean Confucianism has become the main characteristic of the Korean national spirit. Here we need to bear in mind that Zhuxi studies, which was the leading ideological foundation of the Joseon dynasty, had undoubtedly fostered this strong and at times dogmatic cultural ethos. The Zhuxi school has to a large degree formed the basis of the cultural identity of the Korean literati for over five hundred years.

Professor Jin Zhonglie from Korea University, who for many years studied those places where the Chinese language was of great importance, offers the following observation:

Before the impact of Western culture, China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam were all part of the Sinosphere; all used Chinese characters, studied ancient Chinese canons like the *Four Books* and the *Five Classics*, and

were educated in Confucian morals such as *ren* (benevolence), *ai* (love), *xiao* (filial piety), *ti* (respect for elder brothers), *zhong* (loyalty), and *xin* (keeping promises). In this sense we can say that these countries used the same language. Despite their different natural environments and minor differences in lifestyle, the ideas formed by Confucianism—for example in cosmology, view of life, and cultural view—were roughly the same. However, although equally Confucian, the aims pursued by the respective countries as well as their social customs could be very different. The people cultivated by [the educational system in] these countries differed greatly in their ideologies, politics, and life views, largely due to differing national aims.

Jin also notes,

Generally speaking, Chinese Confucianism emphasizes the personal moral life. Filial piety and respect for elders define what one should do. There is a strong atmosphere of modesty and generosity. But the sense of loyalty and patriotism is not very strong. There has always been some distance between the individual and the nation. As for Korean Confucians, they firmly believe that the three principles (三綱) are the root of heaven, earth, and human conduct. Korean Confucianism focuses on filial piety, and only regards one's own family's interests [as important]; thus there is a lack of public morality, even [to the extent of] bearing the foul [taint] of exclusiveness. . . . Japan, as we have said above, . . . holds national aims and national interests above all else, and lays all the moral values on the foundation of loyalty to the monarch and patriotism. Diligence [in devotion] to [their] organization, loyalty to their monarch and nation, [oblivious] of their own and others' lives, they pursue only their national aims and interests. The so-called Japanese spirit is the very product of monarchism, which requires that people abandon personal interests, concentrating [their] efforts on yielding to the state.²⁹

According to Confucian texts, this discourse is not a mere philosophical analysis; rather it has both sociological and anthropological significance. Due to the fact that he was reflecting on his own nation, Jin Zhonglie did not underline or praise the patriotism of Koreans, although his insights into the society are of great value for us.

The Confucian values represented by the five constant virtues are advocated by the Confucianisms found across China, Japan, and Korea. Restricted by their respective socio-historical traditions, not only are the Confucian dispositions different, but each society's value orientation and dominant principles

are different as well, causing a different ethos to develop within each nation's form of Confucianism. Although appropriateness (*yi*) and loyalty (*zhong*) are also advocated by Chinese Confucianism, it is the way of putting oneself in another's position (*ren* and *shu*) that is emphasized. In the case of Japanese Confucianism, although *ren* and *yi* are also encouraged, it is loyalty (*zhong*) that is stressed. As for Korean Confucianism, although the five constant virtues are all advocated in theory, it is appropriateness (*yi*) that is highlighted.

Now these differences are also reflected in the modernization process of each country. Chinese Confucianism, taking *ren* and *shu* as its principle, is apt to confirm a kind of universal value in its principles. However, it has cast much doubt on modern Western civilization. Facing the colonialism and imperialism of the modern West, it has been difficult for Chinese Confucianism to admit its backwardness, and this has resulted in the slow pace of modernization in China. Although the emphasis of Japanese Confucianism on loyalty (*zhong*) and bravery (*yong*) is limited by its exceptionalism, it encountered fewer impediments while accepting modernization. It stepped rapidly into modernity—but paid the price for its exceptionalist ethics. Korean Confucianism, imbued with the spirit of justice (*yijie*), has given rise to the strong national subjectivity of Korean culture. Although it holds on to some of the cultural values from the past, it has nevertheless fostered the development of Korea as a modern national state. Now the principle of harmony included in *ren*, the principle of justice embodied by *yi*, and the principle of order demonstrated by *zhong* are all necessary for the continued vitality of each modern East Asian country. In the twenty-first century, the three countries should try to understand one another, learn from one another, and unite to establish a harmonious future.

Notes

1. For example, see the natural theory of Kaibara Ekken 貝原益軒 and the political theory of Ogyū Sorai 荻生徂徠.

2. Mizoguchi Yūzō 沟口雄三, *Riben xian jieduan de Zhongguo yanjiu ji 21 shiji de keti* 日本现阶段的中国研究及21世纪的课题 (Contemporary Chinese studies in Japan and themes in the 21st century), *Guoji ruxue yanjiu, di er ji* 国际儒学研究, 第二辑 (International Confucianism studies, 2nd series) (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 1996).

3. *Shangshu* 尚書 (Book of Shang), “Kang Gao” 康誥, 6; adapted from the James Legge translation. Translations are my own unless otherwise cited.

4. *Shangshu* 尚書 (Book of Shang), “Pan Geng I” 盤庚上, 7; adapted from the Legge translation.

5. *Shangshu* 尚書, “Kang Gao” 康誥, 2; adapted from the Legge translation.

6. *Yichuan Yizhuan* 伊川易傳 (Cheng Yi's commentary on the *Yijing*), vol. 1.

7. *Analects* 6.30 and 12.2.

8. *Spring and Autumn Annals*, “Bu Er.”
9. *Daodejing*, chap. 67.
10. *Zhuangzi*, chap. 33.
11. *Yuan Dao* 原道 (The origin of *dao*), in *Han Yu wenji* 韩愈文集 (Collected works of Han Yu).
12. *Zhangzi quanshu* 張子全書 (Collected works of Master Zhang [Zhang Zai 張載]), “Xi Ming” 西銘.
13. *Er Cheng quanshu* 二程全書 (Collected works of the Cheng Brothers), vol. 2.
14. *Yichuan Yizhuan* 伊川易傳 (Cheng Yi’s commentary on the *Yijing*), vol. 1.
15. *Zhuzi quanshu* 朱子全集 (Collected writings of Master Zhu), vol. 67, “On *Ren*.”
16. Li Zehou 李泽厚, *Zhongguo gudai sixiangshi lun* 中国古代思想史论 (On the history of Chinese ancient thought) (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1985).
17. Liang Shuming 梁漱溟, *Zhongguo wenhua yaoyi* 中国文化要义 (Essentials of Chinese culture) (Taipei: Liren, 1980), p. 90.
18. See Henry Sumner Maine, *Ancient Law: Its Connection with the Early History of Society and Its Relation to Modern Ideas* (London: Forgotten Books, 2012).
19. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
20. Pan Nai De 潘乃德 [Ruth Benedict], *Juhua yu jian: Riben minzu de wenhua moshi* 菊花與劍：日本民族的文化模式 (The chrysanthemum and the sword: Patterns of Japanese culture) (Zhejiang: Zhejiang Renmin Chubanshe, 1987), p. 100.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
22. Robert Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion: The Cultural Roots of Modern Japan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 7, 22, 26.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 200.
24. Mizoguchi, *Riben xian jieduan de Zhongguo yanjiu ji 21 shiji de keti*, p. 129.
25. *Ibid.*
26. See Huang Junjie, “The Resonance of Zhuxi on *Ren* in Tokugawa Japan,” paper presented at Taipei Zhuzi Forum, October 2011.
27. Liu Chengguo, *History of Confucianism in Korea*, trans. Fu Jigong (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu Press, 1989), pp. 115, 133.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 125. See also Huang Bingtai [Hwang Pyŏng-t’ai] 黄秉泰, *Ruxue yu xian-daihua: Zhong ri han ruxue bijiao yanjiu* 儒学与现代：中日韩儒学比较研究 (Confucianism in modernization: Comparative studies on Confucianism in China, Japan, and Korea [Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 1995], chap. 4).
29. Jin Zhonglie, “The Common Ethic of Confucianism: The Way of Zhongshu,” in *Examining and Prospecting Chinese Culture* (Singapore: Bafang Culture Press, 2001), pp. 511–512 (quotation slightly modified).