

Imagination for “Others”

– Toward a Bright Future for Japan & South Korea –

By Ko Hee Tak

In the early summer of 2004, I first became aware of the “South Korea boom” in Japan upon learning from a student I was teaching that her mother had so changed as to behave as if she had become a slave to the South Korean TV drama “Winter Sonata” aired in Japan. This episode made me contemplate deeply about the new wave of South Korean pop culture in Japan. Mutual relations between the two nations had been viewed hitherto as being negative, as seen in repeated media reports of “Korea-phobia” and

“anti-Japan” moves. Thus, the escalation of Japanese interest in South Koreans and their culture sparked by a TV drama is something quite extraordinary. I believe this social phenomenon signifies a change in the ideological foundation of the peoples of the two countries and the beginning of a structural transition in mutual relations.

Distance from Principles, from “Others”

I am interested in the ideological development of Neo-Confucianism in early modern East Asia. Attention should now be paid to the fact that the antagonistic relationship between Japan and South Korea, thought to have begun in recent years, had actually had its dawning in early modern ideological shifts in both countries.

Neo-Confucianism during the Chosun Dynasty was the principle of nation-building and the sole educational subject that supported the governing system. The culture of Neo-Confucianism was not merely a moral backbone but also was linked to political and economic privileges through the implementation of the *Keju*, or a civil service

exam for selecting bureaucrats. In the second half of the 18th century, about 80% of the population was registered as a sort of ruling class cultured with Neo-Confucianism, indicating the people’s attraction to the philosophy. Neo-Confucianism made people submit to its moral principle of universal order and strengthened its characteristic as ethics for bureaucrats. Its largest target was how to curb personal desires and heighten a sense of public mission.

In reality, however, things were not so easy, liable to cause hypocrisy and deception by ruptures between ideal notions and realities, and lapsing into dogma stemming from fear of them. Roughly speaking, the history of Korean philosophy is a history of fierce ideological struggle attempting to distinguish hypocrisy or deception from discourses claiming to be true to moral principles.

Meanwhile, Neo-Confucianism in Japan in the Edo period (1603-1867) ruled by the Tokugawa family was neither a government-sustaining educational subject based on an institutional device such as the *Keju* exam in Korea nor was it assured of a monopolistic status in the Japanese world of thought where Buddhist and *Shinto* traditions were prevalent. Neo-Confucianism was more attached to the life of common people in cities rather than to the political world. Due to the relatively unfavorable conditions, Neo-Confucianism became the soil for rich development of various thoughts by mingling itself with already prevalent thoughts and religions as well as achieving its own ideological development.

Although generally unknown, many people who went in for Neo-Confucianism in the Edo period were largely influenced by the academic cul-



Photo: KBS

A scene from the South Korean TV drama “Winter Sonata.” First aired in Japan in the winter of 2003, it led to an explosive South Korean boom and is rebroadcast still now. Pure romance of the two lovers got the heart of middle-aged Japanese women.

Photo: PANA

ture of followers of Lee Teo Gye, a scholar with great authority in Korea's Neo-Confucianism. However, they soon became aware of the non-compatibility between the trend toward fundamentalism contained in it and their lives, and Confucians sought to make a comprehensive modification and transformation to the philosophy. A typical example is Ito Jinsai (1627-1705), one of the representatives of such thought movement, who criticized the absence of "other people" in its concept and the self-centered dogma and tyranny circling the philosophy. On the other hand, however, he expressed in a "public" idea the road to the formation of a "dialogic" society based on the acceptance of and generosity toward "others." This relatively liberal private ideological grope led to the discovery of "others" for the first time in the ideological soil of East Asia.

Figuration of the Superior Being

Even though the discovery of "others" came in the course of the modification of Neo-Confucianism, the possibility of such discovery became slim when ethnic identity and a sense of crisis were involved. Rather, Neo-Confucianism was unreasonably accused of being the source of self-centered dogma. A typical example is Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801), a scholar of ancient Japanese thought and culture who was heavily influenced by Ito Jinsai yet ironically proposed as another "public" idea the road to the formation of a community based on ethnic purity through the expulsion of "*Kara-kokoro*" (Chinese will).

Yet Motoori Norinaga's pursuit of ethnic purity was accompanied by a deserved amount of compensation. "Reason" as a moral principle of universal order supported the sense of public mission in Neo-Confucianism, and it was also regarded as "conscience" in humans. In addition, Ito Jinsai, a critic of Neo-Confucianism, saw the ethical order in Neo-Confucianism as a principle declaring to accept and respect "others" with the "heaven" as the supe-



Bae Yong Joon, the male lead in the drama, paid a second visit to Japan in November 2004 following his first in April. About 3,500 fans, including some waiting up all night, welcomed the South Korean star in the arrival lobby at Narita airport.

rior being and ideological origin. But Motoori Norinaga replaced "heaven" with the "emperor," citing a myth, and sealed the universal possibility inherent in the concept of "heaven" and "conscience" in ethnic particularity.

As is well known, the construction of a nation-state in modern Japan and the process toward imperialism thereafter progressed in conjunction with Korea's tragedy. In that process, the hostile relationship was solidified, with "Korea-phobia" and "anti-Japan" based on the victimizer's ridicule and the victim's grudge, and the confinement of such sentiments to their respective peoples.

Toward a Bright Future for Japan & South Korea

I believe the "South Korea boom" in Japan triggered by "Winter Sonata" did not mean a mere interest concentrated on the symbolic code of "South Korea" but represented Japan's discovery of a universal eye and an expression of sympathy to "others" beginning to burgeon in Koreans and their culture. I feel that

behind it lies the Japanese acknowledgement of South Koreans who have become conscious of the need for consideration of true love and respect toward others based on self-humility, different from the conventional straightforward and die-hard, self-centered image of Koreans.

From that standpoint, with democracy and economic development as the foundation of sympathetic relations, this social phenomenon may symbolize empathy from the peoples of the two countries, universal sentiments shared as human beings without sticking to the hitherto historical development of the two countries. A broad and rich range of private interchanges in which "culture" acts as an agent, along with further technological development in the future, must be an important channel for the peoples of the two countries to accomplish reconciliation as true neighbors.

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