

China & Japan: Between “Same Culture, Same Race” & “Just Another Foreign Land”

By Xu Tao

Misconception of “Same Culture, Same Race”

IN China, some people take up the Japanese language light-heartedly in the belief that it would be easy to learn since it contains many Chinese characters. Indeed, the Japanese *kanji* characters were imported from China and the Japanese *kana* alphabets were created out of Chinese characters. To many Chinese, Japanese thus looks less foreign than many other foreign tongues. The reality becomes much different once one starts learning the language. The object-verb sequence in Japanese is the reverse of the sequence in Chinese. The Japanese language contains a lot of restrictive particles, which are not used in Chinese. Also, the honorific rules in the Japanese language are highly rigorous and complex. Actually, Japanese is much more difficult to learn than most Chinese imagine.

Many Chinese find it incomprehensible why the Japanese language is so different from Chinese given that both countries use Chinese characters. They become all the more irritated and upset because they failed to realize from the outset they were about to learn a totally different language with all the attendant difficulties. Not a few of them give up learning Japanese altogether once they realize the sort of hardship they are facing. There is even this saying among foreign-language experts in China: people go into Japanese with a smile and come out with tears.

A similar situation occurs among Chinese concerning the understanding of Japan in general. For many Chinese, their primary interest in Japan is on Japanese modernization, particularly the progress of the Japanese economy and its modern institutions. However, one pre-

conceived idea tends to distort the Chinese outlook: the idea of “same culture, same race.” Many Chinese believe that since Japan had been deeply influenced by China in history, its path of development must have been similar to that taken by China. But for some reason, Japan abruptly changed course as it entered modern times, taking a direction totally different from that followed by China, and achieved considerable success in its modernization efforts. It is in search of this “some reason” that many Chinese have taken an interest in Japan.

I was one of them and shared their views when I started my studies on modern Japanese thinking. Like in China, Confucianism obviously formed the mainstream of modern Japanese thinking and in my studies I sought to understand how modernity sprouted from Confucianism and led to capitalism. Looking at modern Japanese thinking through such colored lenses eventually got me all confused, however. The reason is that such an approach would ignore non-Confucian aspects of Japanese culture. It would, for instance, dismiss Japanese classicism – the branch of Japanese philosophy popular in the Edo era (1603-1867) that sought to find a native Japanese way of life and a native

Japanese spirit through the study of Japanese classics as represented by the classicist Hirata Atsutane (1776-1843) – and people would find it incomprehensible why these classicist ideas form part of the Japanese history of thoughts. I found out that some Confucian teachings such as the ideas of 天 (heaven), 道 (order), 命



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(destiny), 理 (reason) and 良知 (conscience) have different meanings in China and Japan. Scholars from China would surely go nowhere if they tried to use the Chinese understanding of these Confucian teachings to interpret the Japanese terms. The truth is that looking at Japan from a Chinese frame of reference makes it difficult to see the difference between the two countries. I still clearly remember the sense of frustration I had in those days in trying to get the right approach to study Japanese thought.

Toward a Non-partial View of Japan

Many Chinese people are prone to think that since Japan uses Chinese characters and historically Japanese culture has greatly been influenced by Chinese culture, the two peoples must have lots of similarities. As the expression “as different as chalk from cheese” puts it well, similarity is not sameness. If one focuses only on similarities, one tends to be blinded by preconceptions and would be unable to see the true essence. Moreover, by thinking that “we are the same,” one tends to have excessive expectations and becomes



of the two countries to respect each other and think nurtured through history.”

unreasonably irritated when these expectations are not met. Many of the problems confronted by China and Japan, including the friction over the perceptions of history, are probably political in nature but, in the background, the bilateral relationship appears to be overshadowed by a lack of consciousness of “others.”

As the Japanese language is a unique language different in character from the Chinese language, Japanese culture is a unique culture formed by its own his-

torical background. Even though historically it has been greatly influenced by Chinese culture, it is definitely not a tributary of Chinese culture.

In looking at Japan, in coming into contact with Japanese people, Chinese people must first of all get this point clear: the foreign character of the Japanese culture. In other words, we must bear in mind that it is natural that the Japanese people are different from us. Such a mind-frame will surely foster the inclination to really understand the Japanese people and respect them as people of a foreign land, as “others” of a different nature. We should make efforts, without being blinded by preconceptions, to find out what Japan is; understand why Japan is what it is; and then make a judgment about how it is on this basis. “Seek harmony, not sameness.” “Seek common ground on major questions while reserving differences on minor ones.” These sayings should form the principles for peoples of different countries and different backgrounds to get together.

After struggling with the confusions that had once befuddled my Japanese studies, I came to realize a few truths about Japan: that Japanese thought has its own context and that, unlike China, Confucianism has not seeped into every aspect in the life of ordinary people. Also, even though the Japanese use Chinese philosophical concepts such as 天 (heaven) and 理 (reason), the expressions have taken on slightly different, and sometimes radically different, meanings in Japanese. Therefore, instead of using Chinese

thought as the norm, I made an effort to examine Japanese thinking from inside Japan and tried to understand the way the Japanese think within their own context. Japanese thought then became much clearer in its entirety, and so were the differences and similarities with Chinese thinking.

Age of Mass Exchange

Today, the scope of exchange between China and Japan is developing on a great scale unparalleled in history. More than 4.8 million Japanese and Chinese travel to each other's country annually. More than 120,000 Japanese nationals are long-term residents in China, while it has been reported as many as 350,000 Chinese nationals live in Japan. These figures show that exchanges between China and Japan are no longer limited to a particular set of people but have expanded to the general public. Nowadays ordinary Chinese can afford to visit Japan and see the country by themselves. In China, many people come into contact with Japanese in their daily lives and not a few of them have Japanese friends. China and Japan used to see each other as a “close but distant country.” Today, the Chinese and Japanese have literally become “nearby neighbors.”

In such an age, each of us has the obligation to try to correctly understand the other country. We should try to overcome the preconceptions of “same culture, same race” and treat each other on the basis of equality. Undeniably, behind the term “same culture, same race” also lies a special sense of intimacy between the close neighbors. What is essential, and more desirable, is for the peoples of the two countries to respect each other and think differently of each other while treasuring the intimacy nurtured through history. **JS**

Xu Tao, who pursued doctoral studies at the University of Tokyo Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology, specializes in modern Japanese thought and is currently an assistant professor at the Japanese Department of Beijing Foreign Studies University.