

The Thought Patterns Surrounding Confucianism

By Wang Min

THE ongoing “politically cold, economically hot” situation between Japan and China, a deepening antagonism in politics and diplomacy that coexists with burgeoning economic ties, continues without any sign of abating. No one denies that Sino-Japanese relations are a crucial pillar in East Asia, but it remains a regrettable fact that no improvement to a favorable, “politically hot, economically hot” climate appears to be on the horizon.

Sino-Japanese hostility in politics and diplomacy is widening the distrust and aggravation between the people of neighboring countries. Japan and China normalized relations in 1972, and concluded a Peace and Friendship Treaty in 1978. In public opinion surveys at that time, almost 80% of Japanese felt affinity with China. Today, about 25 years later, various newspaper surveys report that only 30% of Japanese feel a closeness to China and those who express a “dislike” for China vastly outnumber the former. The same holds in reverse. In the latest survey in China (conducted by Shanghai Searchina Information Consulting Co., with a sample of 2,000 respondents), 23% of Chinese expressed a “favorable” view of Japan, while 41% had an “unfavorable” view.

Japan and China have interacted since before the beginning of recorded history. The length of the bilateral exchanges between Britain and America is nothing compared with those between Japan and China. Yet there has been no such history of antagonism between Britain and the United States.

Once the United States, which originated

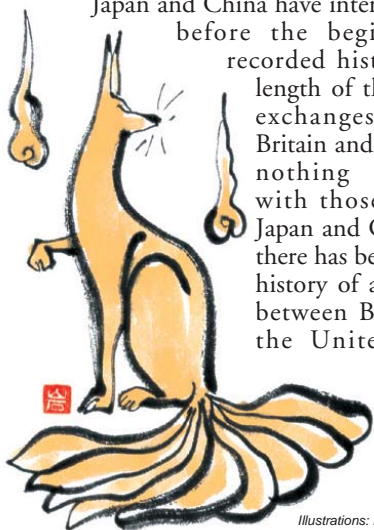
as a British colony, had emerged from the War of Independence and firmly established its national identity, their bilateral relationship involved a long interaction on an equal basis wherein they affirmed and recognized their differences. Japan and China on the other hand, affirm their own identities and do not yield to the other. Needless to say, the rancor from the unfortunate war of half a century ago, during which Japan invaded China and China endured great sacrifices, still lingers, but this contrasts with the case of France and Germany, which are deepening their amicable ties by learning from their history of antagonism.

Prior to the Meiji Restoration (1868), Sino-Japanese relations were fundamentally friendly. When Japan was under the rule of the samurai warriors it interacted well with China. Why was this the case? It may be because such leaders were able to grasp Chinese ways of thought well. The Japanese of that era would probably be able to understand the Chinese people’s perception of history which they are asking the Japanese to understand today. This is because the Japanese of the samurai age knew that the patterns of Chinese thinking are rooted in Confucianism.

Confucianism for Chinese coincides with Christianity for Westerners. After China had headed down the path of a socialist country, the tempestuous Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1977) tried to banish Confucianism from China. Confucianism, which had penetrated deep in the Chinese soul for over 2000 years since the time of Confucius (551BC-479BC), could not be swept away. Confucianism constitutes China’s ethics and virtues, and is the essence of Chinese thought about how to live. After Confucianism had been systematized as a political philosophy by Zhu Xi (1130-1200) during the Song Dynasty, its status as the fundamental

doctrine for national governance was established. China today views Confucianism as the identity of its people. Since 2004, it has been aiming to establish 100 Confucius Institutes around the world, and the first of these in Japan has already opened at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto. The classic texts of Confucianism, *The Four Books and Five Classics*, are now required reading at Renmin University of China, whose role is to train cadres for the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese government.

During the Edo Period under the Tokugawa rule (1603-1867), Japan was divided into more than 260 feudal domains known as *han*. Study of Confucianism was required for the samurai in charge of the government. Each of these feudal domains taught Confucianism at *han* schools, while the *bakufu*, the Tokugawa Shogunate government based in Edo (the present Tokyo), did likewise at the Confucian temple of Yushima. Throughout the Tokugawa Period, the *bakufu* exchanged emissaries with the Yi Dynasty of Korea, with which it maintained close diplomatic amicable ties. There were such Confucianists as Arai Hakuseki (1657-1725) who took charge of government administration, and Amenomori Hoshu (1668-1755) who served the Tsushima *han*, which handled trade with Korea. Korea was viewed as an exemplary Confucian country by China, and the samurai regime of Japan interacted without any trouble with both Confucian countries. Once this military regime was overthrown and the new Meiji government was established, however, Japan embarked on a path of modernization modeled on Western countries, and removed all Confucianists from the center of the government. It rushed ahead with policies of “Leaving Asia and Joining the West.” Although there remained many talented men well-versed in Confucianism in Japan, it was only natural that over time the Japanese would no longer be able to grasp correctly the characteristic pattern of Confucian thinking. It must be difficult for Japan to build friendly relations



Illustrations: Iwasawa Akio

with China without an understanding of Confucianism. Both Japan and China believe that they are homogeneous countries that share the same Chinese characters, without ever being aware that there is a fundamental gap in their patterns of thinking.

What is “Confucian thought” then? It is impossible to describe it in a few words, but it is a way of thought that emphasizes ethics. It strictly seeks to judge right and wrong in both human actions and the state’s activities. It esteems noble causes.

In China, an individual’s death exerts an effect not only on one’s immediate family but even on one’s descendants. A respectable death means “righteousness” or “trust” to oneself, “loyalty” to one’s country, “filial piety” to one’s ancestors and “benevolence” to one’s descendants. In the words of Confucius, “The determined scholar and the man of virtue will not seek to live at the expense of injuring their virtue. They will even sacrifice their lives to preserve their virtue complete.” The Chinese film *The Emperor and the Assassin* depicts Jing Ke, who failed in his attempt to assassinate the emperor and was killed. His name was, however, preserved in the famous historical chronicle by Sima Qian, *Shiji* (Records of the Great Historian), since he died for a noble cause.

For Chinese people, the classic contrasting cases of right and wrong are Yue Fei and Qin Hui of the Southern Song Dynasty. The Song Dynasty was attacked by the northern Jurchen Jin Dynasty, and retreated to the south to establish the Southern Song Dynasty. While the Song general Yue Fei called for all-out battle with the Jin, Qin Hui, the Southern Song court official, instead attempted to reach peace with the Jin, and forced the high-spirited Yue Fei, who was continuing his successful battle, to withdraw from the battlefield. In the end, Yue Fei was arrested and poisoned in prison.

Yue Fei, who was from a peasant background, aspired to save the Song and rose through the ranks to become a great general. In order to reward his tragic

death at the age of 39 in the line of his great cause, subsequent generations of Chinese bestowed the title of “King” on this military commander. They built “King Yue Fei’s Temple” in Hangzhou, which was the capital of the Southern Song Dynasty. By contrast, they despised and dishonored the name of Qin Hui. They created statues of Qin Hui and his wife kneeling towards Yue Fei’s tombstone, with their hands tied behind their backs surrounded by an iron fence, right in front of the entrance of Yue’s Fei Temple. More than 900 years have not been enough to make the Chinese people forget their revulsion. “Flogging the dead” like this comes naturally to the Chinese.

In Japan, there is a tradition of taking death to be a form of “purification” or “cleansing.” The famous Buddhist monk Shinran preached that even an evil person could become a Buddha if he awakened to the faith, saying, “If even a good person can be purified by rebirth into the Pure Land, it goes without saying that an evil person can.” From the Chinese viewpoint though, evil people are evil and good people are good. Confucianism does not budge when it comes to discriminating right from wrong.

The legend of the nine-tailed golden fox highlights the differences between Japan and China. In China, the nine-tailed fox was treated as a demon. During the time of King Zhou, the last ruler of the Yin Dynasty, the fox possessed the king’s beloved lady, Su Da Ji. To please her, the King did anything she asked. Since she was now the embodiment of the fox, which loved blood, she committed many horrible deeds, such as starting a fire under a copper sheet and making the king’s retainers walk over it. This alienated the people, and the Yin Dynasty collapsed. The nine-tailed fox reappeared during the time of King You of the Zhou Dynasty, and destroyed the Western Zhou. The fox’s image is permanently fixed in China as a thoroughly iniquitous and monstrous creature.

The Japanese, on the other hand, have received this nine-tailed fox with open arms. According to the songs of *Noh* play

and the *Joruri* (traditional puppet theater), the fox secretly slipped into Japan on the boat of Kibino Makibi, the Japanese emissary to the Tang Dynasty. The fox took possession of Lady Tamamo-no-mae, who was beloved by the retired Emperor Toba at the end of the Heian Period, and caused him great distress. The evil spirit was exposed and it fled to Nasuno (the present Tochigi Prefecture), but was tracked down and killed. Nonetheless, its magical powers did not disappear and it became the so-called death rock that afflicted suffering on all who touched it. It is said that the magical powers of the nine-tailed fox were finally extinguished by the force of Buddhism. Even though the fox had caused no end of evil deeds in Japan, it was chosen for the name of a boxed lunch sold at local train stations that is known as “Nine-tailed sushi.” The seller of this boxed lunch chose this name in the hope that it would be loved forever, just as the fox in the guise of Lady Tamamo-no-mae had been loved by the retired Emperor Toba. The Japanese habit for flexible reassessment is fully displayed here. It is impossible to imagine the fox’s rehabilitation in China, where it has become firmly entrenched as the embodiment of evil.

It is small wonder that there is such a gap between Japan and China about the visits to Yasukuni Shrine by the Japanese prime minister. Class-A war criminals, who bear responsibility for the last world war, are treated as deities of the shrine. From the standpoint of the Chinese people’s sense of right and wrong, such people remain “evil” for all time. When Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro adheres to the Japanese tradition that an evil person may also become a deity or a Buddha when he or she dies, he has not noticed that this is a pattern of thought that exceeds the understanding of the Chinese. We must conclude that the cost of this disparity in mutual understanding between Japan and China has been far too great. **JS**

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