

A Reconsideration of Japan, Where Confucianism Is No Longer Understood

By Wang Min

THE boom in South Korean films and TV dramas, known as *Hanryu* in Japan, continues throughout Asia. Such programs are assured high audience ratings every time they are rebroadcast, both in China and Japan. One of these is *Dae Jang Geum* (Jewel in the Palace), the story of an indomitable court lady. This deals with a heroine who was exiled and reduced to the lowest servant but rose to a high position during the Yi Dynasty. Viewers are fascinated by the breathtaking story of a beautiful woman who powerfully survives in difficult circumstances of palace intrigue and viciousness. It extols the preciousness of life, and moves viewers deeply. There is no question that it is a work that can teach us how to create a high-quality drama.

However, the impressions that Chinese and Japanese have when watching *Dae Jang Geum* are definitely not the same. South Korea

is a country with a history of faithfully absorbing Confucianism, which

had its origins in China. Since antiquity it has been called “a model Confucian country.” Confucian

elements are depicted everywhere in *Dae Jang Geum* as well.

The typical aspect can be seen by the development of the story

involving the *wako*, the bands of

Japanese pirates who ravaged the area from the coastal regions of

China to the Korean peninsula in the 15th and 16th centuries.

The heroine, Jang Geum, fell to the status of a lowest servant due to a court conspiracy, and was exiled to Jeju Island off the coast of present-day South Korea. When she learns that the path to a comeback to the court is to become a medical maid, she studies hard with extraordinary diligence. She is gifted, and when she has mastered the basics of the medical arts recognized by the islanders, the Japanese pirates attack the island because the leader of the pirates has suddenly fallen ill and needs medical treatment. When the pirates learn that Jang Geum is a medical apprentice, regardless of her resistance, they threaten her by dragging bound islanders before her and saying “If you refuse, we will kill the islanders one by one.” So she has no choice but to treat the leader as best she can, unskilled though she is. After she escapes this intense situation, however, she is arrested for the unforgivable act of treating an enemy leader.

To the Japanese viewer, this episode no doubt depicts a situation involving the cruelty of authority towards the weak, however, a Chinese viewer like myself knows that this is a plotline based on Confucianism, which emphasizes righteousness. In the Confucian way of life, cooperating with the enemy is unjust, no matter what oppression one may be suffering. Confucians do not consider the dire straits of Jang Geum, who makes a bitter decision to save the islanders: they see only the fact that she has treated the enemy. This may be illogical to Japanese, but it is logical in Confucianism. China is the country that created Confucianism, and if one views *Dae Jang Geum* through the eyes of the Chinese, you will be persuaded that this episode is justified. The story reminds us that South Korea is a Confucian country.

THERE is an occurrence from which one gains the impression that South Korea is more Confucian than China itself. This is the recent trend to go back in history more than 60 years, and to hunt out the people who cooperated with the Japanese army during the colonial days and to compel them to atone for this. Laws are created to pursue such people and even asset forfeiture is being promoted. There are civic organizations that are reviewing all South Korean people, and investigating their past history one by one, and creating lists in order to support the government’s pursuit of collaborators with the Japanese army. Regardless of the fact that, in the modern history of Korea, no one willingly cooperated with the Japanese army. This seemingly strict judgment becomes extremely natural if it is based on Confucianism. One often hears voices from Japan criticizing this raking up of history saying “They should not make the descendants responsible for the past behavior of their fathers and grandfathers.”

During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China as well, the “revolutionaries” who were loyal to Mao Zedong’s propaganda mercilessly hunted the “capitalist roaders.” Even those ordinary Chinese citizens who were a bit lenient towards the “capitalist roaders” were accused, and many people who



Illustrations: Iwasawa Akio

could not tolerate the harsh persecution took their own lives. All words and deeds that aided the enemy were deemed to be immoral.

There is no space here to list all the examples in the long history of China of merciless revenge against the old power holders by those who seized power. When dynasties changed in China, sometimes even the painters and potters who served the court were killed. It is assumed that this is the reason why many advanced skills of a court were not inherited by a new dynasty.

Cai Lun, a high court official of the later Han dynasty, invented paper in 105 AD for the Emperor He Di. This was an age when people wrote on wooden slips. If we consider the incalculable role that paper has played in transmitting culture to subsequent generations, then Cai Lun should be listed as one of the greatest men in human history. When he was young, he caused the death of a high-ranking court lady named Song, who was investigated for court intrigue. When An Di, the grandson of the lady, acceded to the imperial throne, he issued an imperial proclamation that Cai Lun was to be executed by poisoning to avenge an old grudge of a half-century earlier. The exact year of Cai Lun's death is unknown, but he was probably close to 70 years old. When entangled in power struggles, even a great man like him could meet with a cruel fate.

There is no overstating that the distinction between black and white in the teachings of Confucianism is strict. It is rigid about separating the orthodox from the heretical, and is a philosophy that takes righteousness as the first principle. This is because there are many things that may seem absurd if one does not understand Confucianism well. I wrote in the previous column that the identity of the Chinese people lies in Confucianism. This time I hope that I have made it clear that just like the Chinese, Koreans are also taking Confucianism itself to be their way of life.

IN Japanese history, there is a historical matter that may seem illogical, but which makes perfect sense when viewed from the standpoint of Confucianism. This is the policy of national seclusion during the Tokugawa Era. The Edo government, which was controlled by samurai or military nobility, prohibited all contact with the outside world in order to preserve its power. When this policy was hammered out, it was decided that people could not go abroad and that anyone who stayed overseas would not be allowed to return. Until the country was forced to open up by the American fleet under Commodore Matthew Perry, Japan shut itself off to the outside world for over 200 years. Generally, Japanese society is lenient to those who are placed in unavoidable circumstances, but after the seclusion policy was put in place, one finds the abnormal situation that even fishermen who met with ill luck and were stranded overseas were not allowed to return to Japan.

As an exception to this rule, one person who returned to Japan was Nakahama Manjiro, or John Manjiro, an interpreter when Perry visited Japan. Manjiro, a native of Tosa (the present Kochi Prefecture), was a fisherman who was shipwrecked by a typhoon, and was saved by an American whaling ship. He sneaked back into Japan, and for a few years he was denied all contact with the people and locked up. This was an order by the Tokugawa military government, but when Perry arrived in Japan, Manjiro had a chance to appear on the stage of history.

Another man, Daikokuya Kodayu, who was a captain, also returned to Japan, but ultimately the sun did not shine on him. In 1783, his cargo ship, which was heading from Ise (the present Mie Prefecture) to Edo, encountered a storm, and he was carried all the way to the Aleutian Island chain in the far north. He could not bear to give up his desire to return home, so he went all the way to the Russian capital of St. Petersburg, where he entreated Empress

Catherine, and was able to return home nine years later on a Russian ship. He died while being kept under house arrest in Edo by the government.

What is common to the two returnees is that the Edo government treated them as criminals who "had seen what they were not supposed to see." If we consider the fact that the Edo government had Confucianism as its state religion, then the government may have carried out the seclusion policy at the counsel of Japan's Confucian scholars. When Japanese today consider this history, they probably feel that tolerant treatment for such men as special cases would have been better, considering their circumstances. In my previous essay, I discussed the historical evidence that Confucian scholars were accorded preferential treatment at the end of the Tokugawa Era in Japan, but Confucianism was also reflected in government policy.

According to Confucianism, hide-bound and obstinate words and deeds become reasonable. It is present-day Japan that cannot understand the fact that China and South Korea confront Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's visits to Yasukuni shrine with such a stringent attitude. Japan and the Japanese people have become too estranged from Confucianism. I may have repeated much the same thing here as I said in my previous essay, but this is what I believe. **JS**

Wang Min is a professor of Hosei University and is a specialist in Japanese literature.

