

### Filial Piety and the Japanese Workplace

Confucianism is a philosophy and moral belief system that is, arguably, the foundation of China's and most of East Asia's civilizations. Part of its teachings *emphasize* the innate goodness of humanity and the need to cultivate one's virtues to make oneself a moral character, and such teachings are regarded as absolute and unmalleable truth. Virtue (德), as defined by the *Confucian Analects*, is a unification of morality and power, or moral force, and it is regarded as the most efficient way to govern one's people and cultivate moral models. Every individual is born with the same moral capacity because everyone possesses the Four Minds from which other virtues **originate**. The Four Minds are the mind of pity, mind of shame, mind of reverence, and the mind that knows right from wrong. From these four minds stem the virtues of humaneness, rightness, decorum, and wisdom, respectively. According to the words of Confucian scholar Master You in the *analects* (1:2), "The noble person concerns himself with the root; when the root is established, the Way is born. Being filial and fraternal – is this not the root of humaneness?". This is to say, filial piety (family love) is the root of all virtues and human relationships. Without the experience of family love, one will not know to choose what is right, feel remorse for wrongdoings, respect social/cultural order, or even be able to distinguish right and wrong. Essentially, one becomes as if he or she was not human.

Master You also mention the Way (道) which refers to how people should **conduct** themselves in an organized government. Part of nature's course that humans must follow is the inherently good human nature imparted from Heaven by following the guidance of the Four Minds and its subsequent virtues of humaneness, rightness, decorum, and wisdom; This is the Way which one first learns to do through the rules and relationships of the family. One's family serves as a "social playground" where children learn the proper conduct by

way of loving their family. Ancient Chinese society had a strict social hierarchy that they believed maintained the stability of the state. A child understands this hierarchy by participating in family life where the wife submits to the husband and the children obey their father just as the slave serves the master and the minister serves his king. An organized government and society are rooted in the extension of this family love in what is referred to as graded love. In Master You's words (1:2): "Among those who are filial toward their parents and fraternal toward their brothers, those who are inclined to offend against their superiors are few indeed" and resultingly create disorder. For example, it is standard that a son will love and obey his father and his father will love and care for his son. The love shared in the superior-inferior relationship between father and son is to be extended outside the family unit. In the same way a son respects and loves his father, citizens should respect and love their ruler. Similarly, the love and care the father shows toward his son, the inferior, a ruler should also exhibit this love and care to his subjects. To grossly simplify, the needs of the people are satisfied, the ruler is respected, and peace and order are established in the state as a result. Without family life, one cannot make positive contributions to the organization of the government and the stability of the state.

Teachings of filial piety and graded love were among the many Confucian ideas transmitted across the East Asian region, though Japan was one of the later civilizations to take up its doctrine. The first Confucian texts were sent in 400 C.E. from the Korean peninsulas to Japan during the Han Dynasty's territorial expansion across East Asia (Tucker, "Introduction of Confucianism into Japan", 2018). Over time, ideas from Confucianism and Mencius's developments were taught to Japanese militants, the Shogunate – a class of military leaders who worked with samurai. Although, Japan's developments of Confucianism, particularly neo-Confucianism, did not become too prominent until the 15th century Tokugawa period

(Encyclopedia, “Tokugawa Confucianism (1600-1868)”, 2021). Unfortunately, neo-Confucianism’s growing prominence was a product of the Japanese invasion of Korea in which already existed many Confucian scholars. Japan received Confucianism quite well since its teachings had a great deal of commonality with the traditional Japanese family system and respect for social hierarchy. However, ideas of filial piety and loyalty did not become a part of the standard school curriculum until the Meiji Restoration in the late 19th century. By this time, Confucianism had lasted in Japan for centuries and it had attained significant victories against powerful states like Russia. This fact led Japan to believe that not only are Confucian civilizations superior but also that Japan was the ultimate form of civilization in East Asia. Japan’s notion of superiority did not remain long after it suffered a significant loss at the end of World War II – the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima (Encyclopedia, “Confucianism in Modern Japan”, 2021). The salience of Confucianism also suffered an immense setback that it has not recovered from in contemporary Japanese society.

Still, teachings of loyalty and devotion to the family remain an integral contributor to Japanese society and have not been entirely abandoned. Observably, similar attitudes of loyalty and piety displayed in the feudal Japanese family system have been extended towards the workplace such as collectivism, preference for mutually beneficial human relationships, and harmonized groups. Furthermore, family life was considered the root of morality and all proper conduct, and self-assessment and others’ judgment were based on the status and quality of their families. In the same way, the workplace in contemporary Japan holds significant value to the esteem and reputations of the Japanese.

Filial piety – the reverence shown towards one’s parents – and the overall structure of the family are like the respect and obedience employees show towards their superiors. In the

traditional Japanese family system, children obey their parents, wives obey their husbands, and siblings share relatively equal ground, though being among the elder siblings and gender can impact each child's authority. And the eldest son inherits the family's wealth and estate.

Similarly, the structure of Japanese companies is based on rank and, coincidingly, seniority. The relationship between junior and senior is the heart of the Japanese company. The mentality of the junior is that if he or she successfully follows the instructions of the senior and shows respect, that senior's position will eventually belong to him or her. Juniors continue to have this mentality as they climb the corporate ladder and often end up employed at the same company in their lifetime. As a father receives the brunt of responsibility for the wrongdoings and failures of his family, seniors likewise must take formal responsibility for their subordinates' mistakes; The reputation of that senior's entire department may also suffer just as the father's family name does in traditional Japanese society.

The hierarchy within the traditional Japanese family is relatively present with Japanese companies which expectedly means some of the gender inequalities within the family system are quasi-present in the workplace, particularly in the case of women. Men in Japanese companies are disproportionately given more promotion opportunities and leadership positions than their female counterparts of similar working and education status. As of 2019, about 5.2% of board directors in Japanese companies were women compared to the US where women composed 38.6% in 2018 and 33.4% in the UK. Moreover, Japan ranked 167th out of 192 countries in women's representation in the government (Women in the Workplace: Japan, 2021). The patriarchal system within the Japanese family unit continues to affect the social hierarchy of the companies.

Entering the workforce in Western society is a sort of rite of passage that shows one's growing independence. For Japan, entering the workforce is not just a sign of newfound independence; The company Japanese work at can also be viewed as an "extension of a worker's family" in which they offer 'lifetime employment and security in return for loyalty and hard work' (Rear, n.d., p. 2), akin to the father's role as the provider and the wife and children's role of submission and servitude. According to the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, in 1988 citizens of the USA worked an average of 1,960 hours, Germany worked 1,620 hours, and Japan topped at 2,190 work hours (Bishop, 2004, p. 515). Of course, labor reforms and attitude changes within the current working generation have reduced those hours, but the work culture remains the same on a fundamental level. To put it into perspective, the typical full-time American employee will work around forty hours a week compared to Japanese employees who work *at least* fifty hours per week. The work culture in Japan places high regard on those who show the utmost devotion to their company which is exhibited by working overtime. Those who do not work overtime present themselves as the less loyal and contributing individuals to the company. And it is near impossible to earn a promotion without a consistent completion of overtime hours. Japanese employees' sense of loyalty to their companies is reflected in their long and strenuous work hours.

Zixia, a Confucian disciple of Master You (1:7) said individuals "who in serving [their] parents [are] able to summon up [their] entire strength...I would definitely call [them] learned." To be 'learned' in this context is to have a sound understanding of what it means to be humane and virtuous which, as previously mentioned, is attained through filial piety and love. The ultimate end of being humane and virtuous is bringing peace and order to the state. In the context of work in Japan, peace and order would be akin to efficiency and cooperation within the

workplace. Efficiency and cooperation can largely be attributed to employees' willingness to work excessively as well as their willingness to operate according to the overall needs of the group or company. In the Confucian family system, the needs of the individual family members do not dictate how the family conducts their daily lives. Confucian civilizations are widely collectivistic, so the individual needs of the people are rarely given much consideration. Instead, the entire family unit can be regarded as the individual, and each member part does their job to meet the larger needs of the family. Japanese companies operate similarly. For the sake of meeting weekly quotas or preserving the team spirit of the company, personal ambitions and needs are expected to be set aside.

This is not to say that the Japanese have little to no sense of self. That could not be farther from reality. As defined by Graham (2003, p. 230), individualism is one's concept of self that is to some extent 'autonomous and unbound by the external'. The West's more self-centered view of the individual is due to the strong influence of Christianity. While Christianity does inquire that followers care for brothers and sisters, it is the individual actions of each Christian judged by God that determines whether one makes it to heaven or hell. Heaven and Hell are the two ends all of humanity will come to when the world ends, and the greatest accomplishment or failure one can gain. Since everyone's eventual end is dependent on their personal lives and actions, reasonably, one's sense of self will be substantially defined by their personal life. In Confucian teachings, the end that is most emphasized is harmony, prosperity, and overall peace in the world. Achieving this end depends on the collective efforts of the state in raising virtuous citizens, and the first step to becoming a virtuous person is to participate in family life. Of course, a family is not composed of one person but multiple people, therefore, it is impossible to achieve the end of peace and prosperity by oneself hence why East Asians' individualism is so

heavily dependent on their in-group. In feudal or modern Japan, even if a young student was impressively learned in Confucian doctrine and virtue, the failures and disruptive actions of his siblings or parents would certainly blemish his reputation and self-esteem. Contemporary Japanese society no longer places such a degree of emphasis on family and its importance to a harmonized world, but the need to be part of a group to have a sense of identity continues to remain. This is especially the case in Japanese schools and work.

Becoming an individual in one's company has a strong correlation with becoming a member of Japanese society. The correlation can be seen just by looking at the Chinese characters used to arbitrarily represent "member of society" in the Japanese language: 社会人. The characters 社 and 会 mean 'company/office' and 'to meet', respectively. Interestingly, the same Chinese characters are used to represent "company/workplace" (会社). It can also be seen in the loss of identity one feels when he or she is fired from a job or fails to find stable work. Several unemployed Japanese have expressed low self-esteem and identity crises (Graham, 2003, p. 156, 231). It is almost like being without a family during the time Confucianism was prominent. Orphaned children were among the most unfortunate members of Confucian civilizations because they did not have families to experience the family love so essential to morality and virtue. Given that humaneness was one of the Four Virtues, orphans did not have the opportunity to properly manifest that virtue and were often seen as less human. The family unit was also how people identified themselves as human being and developed their sense of character.

When hiring, Japanese companies will consider skills and traits like cooperativeness, problem-solving, and productiveness, but their evaluations are largely based on congruent attitudes and values with the company and teachability. This means that Japanese individuals

approach the hiring process with their preexisting values. Those in managerial positions will consider whether the potential hires' values and attitudes align with the company enough to not risk disrupting the harmony of the group. Teachability mainly has to do with shaping the individual's character around company values. So, the employee's accomplishments improve the reputation and prestige because their success is believed to be a result of working within the company's framework. Concordantly with Confucian doctrine, a state's accomplishment of peace and harmony is the result of the collective people's abidance to the Way (道) and their subsequent virtue. It also increases the self-esteem of the employee because their sense of identity and corresponding values are appreciated and contributive to the company that they have decided to devote themselves to. While unemployed Japanese will not feel dehumanized by their lack of work as an orphan would their lack of family, a feeling of belongingness to a group or family, in a sense, is missing and causes them to feel as if they are not a true functioning member of their society (社会人). Seemingly, the same value placed on having a family is, arguably, placed on having a company to work for.

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