

Philosophy, Can It Be Internationalized?

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Can philosophy be internationalized? The question at this point in time may seem peculiar as the International Research Center for Philosophy was established with tackling this very issue as one of its specific aims. However, it seems that the more globalized our world becomes, the more hidden, or masked, fundamental issues regarding this question come to be. Thus, looking at these more fundamental issues is the real task in front of us here.

What are some of the reasons behind today's unavoidable topics? There are a variety of ways to look at this issue, but one thing that can be suggested is that as the world has become increasingly globalized; national and local societies have undergone a radical change whereby traditional monocultural approaches can no longer stand unchallenged. Indeed, cross-cultural studies entered the limelight in previous times as an experiment in confronting monoculturalism. Cross-cultural studies aimed to clarify the unique characteristics of the cultural heritage of various localities with an evenhanded approach. This was coupled with strong warning cries about the tendency that monoculturalism has to fall into a kind of dysfunctional isolationism. Cross-cultural studies achieved great results and its comparative approach is still highly effective even today. *Kokugaku* (国学, literally “national studies”), the study of classical literature and culture, is covered in a seemingly relentless self-congratulatory atmosphere, so cross-cultural studies even today play a highly vital role in counter-balancing this tendency.

In recent years in China, the study of traditional culture and the classics, known as *guoxue* (国学, “national studies”), is flourishing. Within the field, Confucian philosophy seems to occupy the place of honor, forming the foundation of various fields. This is an interesting development if we look back to around 30 years after the founding of the People's Republic of China, and particularly during the Cultural Revolution, when Confucian philosophy was deemed a feudal ideology and was greatly looked down upon.

When I was a student, it was held up in contrast to communist and Maoist thought and became so stigmatized that research on the subject itself became impossible. The current situation we see today is a world apart. This return to Confucian philosophy and classical studies is perhaps a means of remedying the destruction in social morals, symbolized by a money-worshipping trend now seen in the country—something that can be said to be resulting from the spillover of China's economic growth, which occurred without the introduction of the philosophical idea of modern Western democracy. Therefore, while the resulting new flourishing of Confucian studies is welcomed, there are also grave misgivings about a creeping return to monoculturalism and a loss of cultural universalism if the effects of this new interest in traditional Chinese thought only results in nationalistic boasting. There is sufficient concern about this danger because China had been the center of Sinocentrism.

Methodology in comparative studies can be divided into two roughly different approaches. The first is one of direct exchange whereby the possibility of the effects of the observer is recognized, and the reality of the benefits and changes deriving from this are made clear. The other does not incorporate direct exchange or recognize influences but rather seeks to make comparisons by focusing on similarities in fields or research results to clarify individual traits and characteristics. The former is referred to as the relative approach while the latter as the absolutist approach. Recently, Arisawa Akiko showed impressive results in using both approaches in her work on comparative cultural studies of China and Japan (cf. *Hikaku bunka: nihon to chugoku no aida*; Kenbun Shuppan). Nakamura Hajime's comparative history of ideas was a driving force in this, though I do not know enough of the details to make more than an allusion to his work here.

Comparative studies, then, has served as one method for avoiding the pitfalls of monoculturalism—and the results of this

has borne fruit. Why, then, do we now need to have a label of “international studies?” I think there are two reasons to consider.

First, because comparative studies are based on the making of comparisons, the results must be cautiously interpreted in terms of proposals about cultural value since these values are tied to the times. That is, while comparative studies are important in the avoidance of self-righteousness in the comparative study of cultural heritage, any proposed “questions” about new value systems made at the present time, are necessarily themselves questions about the times.

The second reason concerning the need for having this label of “international studies” can be illuminated by looking back at the history of philosophy in Japan. Philosophy in Japan can be divided into three main currents. Because Japan is historically part of East Asia, from the time in which Japan adopted Chinese characters for writing, the influence of Chinese philosophy has been enormous. As part of that history, Confucian philosophy became the dominant philosophy in Japan beginning in the 17th century, during the Edo period. Before that, it was Buddhism which had the strongest impact on Japan’s philosophical world of ideas. However, it was a Chinese-interpreted form of the Buddhist thought that entered Japan. It would not be until the Meiji period (1868-1912) that Japanese scholars began to directly study Indian Buddhist sources. European philosophical thought first became known as early as the Japanese Christian era (late 16th century); however, it was not until the Meiji period that European philosophy was to be seriously studied or applied. Japan’s philosophical world of ideas has absorbed the great riches found in Chinese, Indian, and Western thought and has been much enriched by the world of philosophy.

As I do not have experience reading the pre-Muromachi (pre 1333) era philosophical sources, I prefer not to discuss them here and will move straight to the Meiji period (1868-1912) and on to the present. This period from Meiji onward is regarded as that of modern society and is usually divided into the period under the Meiji Constitution (1889) and the period under the Constitution of Japan (1945). During the Edo period, institutional ideology was Buddhism. The Edo period was the age of Buddhism, and Confucianism was the thought that stood as its challenger. Confucianism in turn became the institutional ideology during the Meiji era under the Meiji Constitution, and Enlightenment thought took its place to challenge it. Enlightenment thought then became the institutional ideology in the days of the Constitution of Japan, namely, the contemporary period. The institutional ideology may have changed, but ancient Buddhism and Confucianism worked to keep themselves fresh and are studied even today for practical purposes as the civic ethics of the people. While painted in broad brushstrokes, the above is the basic picture.

European philosophy may be the legacy of only one particular geographical region, but it is seen in Japan as the de-facto standard “world philosophy.” This misapprehension is fostered by the sources of present-day Western European philosophy which Japan grappled with as it worked to establish a modern society. Japanese philosophy took from the Western tradition based on its own needs and hopes as part of its own project, and this is something that continues to today. Japan did not receive Western philosophy in a vacuum. It had already been schooled in thought based on the philosophical sources of Buddhism and Confucianism, and consequently received it with its own culture for a foundation. This pattern of building on an existing foundation was particularly striking during the Meiji period. Stimulated by its engagement with Christianity, the Buddhist establishment attempted to refresh its own doctrines. Confucian thought was heavy with elements that had been absorbed by the world of the *ikkun banmin* (“one ruler, many people,” that is, the principle that all people are subordinate to a single sovereign) and Japanese family systems. However, people also actively studied the Freedom and People’s Right Movement (Nakae Chōmin, Ishizaki Tōkoku, etc.) and anarchist thought (Ishikawa Sanshirō). Meanwhile, Confucian ethics, which provided the social ethics of the day, were studied with the same practical intent even among Christian thinkers (Uchimura Kanzō, Nitobe Inazō, etc.). This same syncretism can also be found among so-called Western philosophers. The caricature of Karl Löwith studying European philosophy when in his second floor study but living his life based on Confucian ethics when downstairs must also have a glimmer of truth in it as well. The world of daily life and the world of the mind were separated from one another. We can see such examples in Edo-period Confucian understandings too, such as the *reigaku keisei* idea that good government was based around regulating rites (*rei*), music (*gaku*), punishments (*kei*), and administrative policies (*sei*). It was the group of people involved with *shingaku* (心学, lit. “heart learning”)—a popularized blend of Buddhist, Shinto, and Confucian ethical teachings—who earnestly applied Confucian thought to philosophies of how to live. From the Meiji period

onward as well, while so-called scholars strained their minds at their worktables over philosophical ideas that originated in Europe, it was social activists who worked out the principles for social change. Even these social activists, however, would boldly reinterpret the Confucian moral codes that permeated civil society and incorporate them into their logic of change.

What I am trying to suggest is that, as we talk about the internationalization of philosophy, we should take careful note of the fact that when we take up non-Japanese philosophies and use them to revitalize and enrich existing ideologies, we do so with those mentalities that have long permeated our civilization without our being aware of it providing the foundations for their reception. On the other hand, internationalization does not mean drawing on philosophical resources from around the world. Quite the opposite: the crucial thing is to face the world and produce significant content that is of value to contemporary international society. The only choice for we Japanese is to do that from Japan. There is no abstract “international society.” What we have is a clustering of national and ethnic states, each plastered with its own set or sets of traditional values; that series is international society. Those patterns of thinking are now in the marrow of the people who comprise those various national and ethnic states; they cannot be fundamentally altered even if you try to force the philosophies and ideas of different cultures on them. Therefore, to misrepresent one’s own philosophy and ideas as an “international standard” or to try and impose them on other cultures would not only cause needless friction but could cause hostility and ultimately lead to unhappy consequences.

If one were to attempt to internationalize philosophy from Japan, such an attempt would aim for a neutral and objective understanding and absorption of the philosophical sources found in European, Indian, and Chinese thought, and for it to be used as fodder for thinking, the results of which would then be made known to the world. This would be a valuable way to approach things. Another approach entails the expectation that one could understand foreign philosophies through the very act of immersion. However, there would be difficulties for either approach as long as we limit ourselves to a cursory review of the fruits of comparative studies (cf. Criticism on Mori Arimasa by Takata Hiroatsu, etc.) Japanese culture absorbs foreign philosophies based on Japan’s particular multilayered worldview. It does not recognize—nor, moreover, face up to the fact—that its reception thereof contains deviations and changes in tone. Will the differences in the mentalities behind them become apparent if Japanese sincerely confront themselves while seeing themselves in relative terms? Discovering such gaps and discrepancies is what nurtures the perspective needed for producing our own unique identities. Uncritical imitators cannot understand what it is that makes them special, and as long as they do not understand that it will only be mutually bothersome to both parties involved, no matter how words of admiration are strung together.

We are talking about this because, in Japan, we reflect on the history of the study of Chinese philosophy. Edo period “Confucians” came from the samurai and merchant classes (mainly private citizens). In China, however, the study of Confucian philosophy was in the hand of scholar-officials (the highly literate bureaucrats who made up the ruling-class of the country). Japan had the decentralized *hanbatsu* (domains-shogunate) system of government, while China had centralized authoritarian rule. The differences between their respective political and social organizations were striking, as seen for example in the relative strengths of communities based on blood relationships (e.g., the Chinese *zongzu*, or clan, system and how strongly people were aware of such matters). Yet, while there were always Japanese who held China’s authority and current fashions in honor, they in general never understood that and for that reason remained trapped in their own time. In the Meiji period Confucianism became the institutional ideology and it found a place in the sun. However, it was absorbed by the affairs of state. Those who sought to retain Confucianism’s original stance—which entailed cultivating the character of its citizens in order to transform society and engaging in a quest for international solidarity—were in fact few and far between. The cultural discrimination present in Confucianism was incorporated and became embedded in *Kokugaku* (“national studies,” 国学). They could not relate either Confucianism, which was the object of their research, or *Kokugaku*, which was being touted the most loudly at the time. The study of the Chinese philosophy known as Confucianism was not the only thing to experience this failure. The same was true for Indian and Western philosophy.

Bias is difficult to avoid in cross-cultural understanding. Is this tendency for bias inherent to the Japanese mentality, or is the problem that the philosophical issues being faced here are out of tune with Japanese society? If we do philosophy knowing

from the start that this bias will get into the results, one wonders whether or not those results will display something unique and, if for that very reason, if something will be produced that is worth passing on to international society.

The academic field known as *tetsugaku* (“philosophy”) was created in Japan. The word *tetsugaku* was coined during the Meiji period, when Japanese were forced to come up with words to identify concepts new to them imported from the West, such as philosophy as a distinct academic discipline. The Japanese words for “religion” [*shūkyō*], “democracy” [which went through several iterations before settling on *minshu shugi*], and “politics” [*seiji*], for example, are among other terms coined around the same time that would also subsequently be adopted by Chinese. Despite the fact that *tetsugaku* is written in Chinese characters (哲学), it is a Japanese word and the Japanese approach to the discipline is now firmly established in the region. In China, words such as “philosopher” (哲人) and “wisdom” (明哲) are all linguistic imports from Japan. “Love of wisdom” (愛知) could be a suitable translation. The most appropriate word we can find for “philosophy” in Chinese thought is contained in the word “learning” (*xue wen*, 學問). The true meaning of *xue wen* meant “to inquire”, as in “asking a question.” To learn is to ask. And *xue wen* was an activity that was aimed at grasping what issues were relevant and of concern to society; pushing back obstacles in an endeavor to come up with real possibilities for appropriate normative solutions. Places were set aside in towns for symposiums devoted to this activity and attesting to this practice. Confucian *xue wen* signifies the aforementioned process of inquiry. It is also an exercise in practical ethics. It could be called a project in the philosophy of how to live. This legacy is something that continues in today’s Japan, but the main proponents are citizens and townspeople. Scholars are those providing the sources. This is something that China, Japan, and Korea all share, but it is in Japan’s *shingaku* (心學, lit. "heart learning") that we see this practice at its deepest level of social penetration.

Japan’s *shingaku* is based on the belief that human nature is fundamentally good. A population of people that does not generally believe human nature to be fundamentally good would probably have trouble in accepting *shingaku*. Therefore, the same might be said for societies which do not accept the Christian Jehovah or the Muslim Allah; for each probably does not grasp the fundamental philosophy underlying the other’s religion. It is for this reason that differences in underlying truths and principles among philosophies must be mutually acknowledged as is, and then philosophical “inquiries” made from this basis. From these “inquiries” we can achieve rich discourse in the style of debate. From the roots of our nature come what are original and distinct characteristics, and this is exactly why this kind of “inquiry” will be highly beneficial in terms of looking at other cultures as well. “Inquiring” is not a mere attempt to correctly grasp something else in a proprietary manner. Especially in today’s international society with its seemingly unending number of complicated issues, this style of philosophical “inquiry” seems an appropriate approach. And it is perhaps this inquiry itself which can be said to be the internationalization of philosophy.