

The application of Confucian positive ethics on education in Japan and valuable lessons for Vietnam

Lam Ngoc Nhu True - Lecturer, Faculty of Oriental Studies, Ba Ria – Vung Tau University, Vietnam.

Truong Nu Van Thi - Vice Dean, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Ba Ria – Vung Tau University, Vietnam.

Abstract: This article aims to study the application of positive ethical values about education of Confucian ethics in Japan with a developing education system and to draw some lessons for Vietnam educational system. The results of the research show that experiencing many periods of cultural exchanges, Confucianism, the ethnical-political doctrine started and founded by Confucius in around the sixth century B.C., has widely been spread and has deeply affected the life, culture, thoughts, and ethnics of people in some Asian countries. Especially, the Confucian education ideology, every its aspects such as general thoughts on education, education objectives, education contents, education methods cover positive ethics and have a strong influence on teaching ways in many countries over a long history period. Japan is one of the countries which have employed these values effectively towards training and developing labor force to meet the demand of building and developing their economy and society. Japanese educational development has brought Vietnam valuable lessons on inheriting the quintessence to developing its educational system.

Keywords: Confucian positive ethics, Japanese educational development, Vietnamese educational system.

Full text

1. Introduction

China is one of the large cultural Oriental cultivation centers. Philosophy ideology of China has long established its position in the development process of history and thought of human being. Confucianism is one of the most important philosophy, political, and social doctrines in the philosophical history of ancient China. Although it appeared in the early ages, Confucianism favored humanism, especially education. Education thoughts of Confucianism have great effects on political and social life not only in China but also in other countries in Asia, including Japan and Vietnam.

2. Objective

The way Vietnam and Japan approached and developed Confucianism is different, and the perception and application of this doctrine in these two countries is also not the same, especially in the field of education.

In the last decades, by applying this doctrine into education in the right and creative way, Japan educational system has a long way ahead in comparison with other countries in the regions. The educational development of Japan brings valuable lessons to Vietnam in the perception of elite values into education development. Thus, the objective of this research not only analyses core contents of Confucian educational thoughts but also study how Japan has applied positive ethical education values of Confucian ethics into its educational system and from these studies, makes some suggested lessons for Vietnam.

3. Methodology

This research is made in a documentary research emphasizing descriptive analysis, and it based on books and academic articles from Japan, Vietnam and other Asian countries.

4. Results and Discussion sections

The research analyzed and studied the three following sections:

Section 1: Core contents in educational thoughts of Confucianism.

Confucian educational thoughts are about opinions on education in general and education objectives, education contents, teaching methods, and teacher role in education in particular.

Opinion on education:

Education is a way to direct people to prestigious values such as benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and fidelity.

Which are standard qualities of people in feudal society.

Education is necessary towards everyone, so everyone has a chance to go to school. (“No education no human” means that there is no discrimination in education.)

Education is the most powerful tool and the shortest way to educate managers and leaders of the society in the system of feudalism. These people are called gentlemen.

Through education, Confucians also wanted to spread feudal thoughts of ruling class to every other class in the society, particularly a ruled class and dominate the society to secure the social order at that time.

Education objectives:

The overall objective of education aimed at educating people to be able to adjust themselves to the society and doing what is assigned. Confucianism issued some specific educational objective. First, education is to form ideal personality. Second, education is to educate people to become officials to bring benefits to the country. Third, education is to expose virtue of human and target at good wills. So, we can say that the main objective of education, according to Confucianism, is to train people to have good wills, and perfect ethnic, personality, knowledge and way of life as well.

Education content:

Historical and eco-socio background of the Spring and Autumn Warring period paved the way to the appearance of educational thoughts of Confucianism. This is the historical period when ancient China experienced many huge changes, especially ethnics of human being. Facing this situation, many Confucians laid down as a policy the education of “how to become good people” This means that education helps to train people necessary and suitable for a ruling class, and these people always think and behave in the righteous and ethical standards. If Confucius focused on educating humaneness, righteousness or justice, proper rite, knowledge, integrity, Xun Zi, a Confucian scholar who mostly lived in the Warring States Period put more emphasis on the role of ritual and music in educating people, in which humanity has the deepest meaning. It is considered the core ethnic principle to govern the human characteristics and to establish the relationship between members in the family and society. This is a deeply meaningful content helping to instill knowledge to and shape the feelings of people, directing them to good values.

Education methods:

Confucians presented education target, education content, and education methods as well. These methods are illustrated as follows:

Method knows how to classify students.

Method to cooperate study and practice: saying going together with doing, putting what ever learn into practice and apply what have learned into life. “Scholars should learn literature first (the Book of Songs, the Book of History)” to broaden their knowledge, and then following the rituals to keep their personality to avoid doing illegally.... (The Analects of Confucius)

Method to respect learners’ self-consciousness and effort. “People who do not try their best to understand, and teachers cannot help to understand well. People who do not try their best to express their ideas, and teachers cannot help to exploit themselves. People who understand one thing do not try their best to discover the other things, and teachers do not need to teach them anymore... (The Analects of Confucius)

Method to dialogue openly is to establish relationship during the process of teaching and learning-the link between teacher and learner, teaching and learning- to promote activeness, creativeness and ability to dynamically think of learners.

Method to review what have ever learned to know new things. “People who review what have ever learned to discover new things will be a teacher” (The Analects of Confucius)

Method to set a good example. According to Confucius, apart from learning from teachers, learning from textbooks, people need to learn from life “if three people go together, of course there will be a teacher; people should choose what right to learn and consider what wrong to correct themselves”

In conclusion, Confucianism presented extremely useful specific methods to help learners to gain knowledge to perfect themselves day by day. This also makes content of education ideology more abundant and meaningful not only with the learners but also with the teachers and education activities as well.

About the role and position of teachers in education:

From the point of view of Confucianism, teacher is a person who guide students how to learn by themselves. Process of teaching and learning is the mutual communication between teachers and learners, helping students gain knowledge and actively deal with every situation.

Moreover, Confucians also think that teachers need not only deep knowledge to teach students but also good personality and morals to set a good example for students. Teachers' personality is a powerful tool toward students, and students will follow their teachers' personality to believe that what teachers teach is the truth and righteous things to do. Thus, according to Confucianism, teachers play a very important role in education process. Teachers not only direct learners towards fine things but also help students avoid wrongdoings. For education to achieve good results, the role of teachers is inevitable.

Discussion session 1:

Confucianism is an influenced philosophical doctrine in the history of Oriental thoughts. As a political-moral doctrine, Confucianism paid a special attention to educating and training people. Confucians said that training people is one of the main tasks of ruling classes and also a useful tool to bring society from disorder to order. Education thoughts of Confucianism included many logic factors to become a powerful tool of many reigns in the history to educate people to keep the society in order. However, it was born in the great-change-period of China, Spring-Autumn Warring Period, so it also included weakness and limits.

❖ *Section 2: Application of positive values of Confucianism in Japan*

After being introduced into Japan, from the late 4th century, Confucianism has gradually been considered greatly by Japanese noble class. In 604, Prince Shotoku used Confucian ideas to compose the constitution. Until Nara period (710-794) and in the early Heian (794-1185), Confucianism developed strongly among noble classes and clergies. Confucianism fell into recession in the late Heian period. From the period of Kamakura, especially from the period of Muromachi until Sengoku, Confucianism was restored with the development of Shushigakuha. In this stage, Japanese found the way to Shushigakuha to seek a doctrine that can classify orders and keep their personality to mark an end to out-of-order situations happening for ages. Entering into the period of Edo (1603-1868), the peaceful and stable period, Shushigakuha was encouraged and became the official Confucianism school of Japan. Since that time, Japanese applied positive values of Confucianism into education creatively.

The first thing is opinions on education. Confucians believed that education is necessary because whoever people, good or bad, also need to be educated. Thus, Confucianism thought that “no education, no human” It can be said that this policy normalized education, which overcame class discrimination and positions in the society to bring education to every class and people in the society. From this point of view, Confucianism broke privileges of noble class and high rank officials to take education to normal people in the society. In Japan, in the early introduction period, Confucians was only popular in upper classes, then became national political thoughts and was compulsory knowledge towards government officials (since the reformed Taika 646). After a crisis and recession, Confucianism was restored and spread widely in normal people, especially in Edo period. Education of Confucianism was no longer the privilege of noble class. Youmeigakuha was considered one of the schools of thought that attracted a lot of people because it prioritized in “heart of people”, economy, and common people. Youmeigakuha opened the door to every person in the society without any favor. From the period of Meiji, from the moral philosophy of Confucianism, Japanese government issued

the policy that there is no discrimination in ethnic groups, religions, or classes of any people. Any people who are capable to learn and have a desire to make a contribution to the development of the country will be sent to Western countries by the government to get updated technological knowledge and science to come back home to support the country. The philosophy “train people to support the development of the country” is fair to every person in the country, thus Japanese have a belief that their fate and chance was determined by studying studious and they share the same opportunity to study regardless of their position or religions. So, we can say the concept of fairness is crucial in the educational system of Japan. Most of Japanese believe that they are living the fair society, in which their origins or possessions is not as important as their effort to prove themselves. This is one of the vital factor leading to the development of eco-socio of Japan in general and education of Japan in particular.

The second thing is education objective. The education target of Confucianism as mentioned above is to spread humanity to common people to train people know to live accordingly with their positions to secure social orders. This proves that Confucians recognized the important and decisive role of people in the development process of the country. Thus, the education target of Confucianism is useful and practical. Compared to other countries namely China, South Korea, and Vietnam, the way Japan applied the Confucianism philosophy into education is somewhat different. These countries defined that the education target of Confucianism is to take exams and employ government officials whereas Japan applied it to create free academic education system. While in China, Vietnam and other countries in Asia, people who are in charge of Confucianism are government officials or scholars in the village, the counterpart in Japan is experts on Confucianism and samurai approaching Confucianism as a subject about individual morals. Hence, Japanese always recognize the existence of various Confucianism parties. For instance, in the Edo period, although Shushigakuha represented by Hayashi Razan was recognized as the official party, other schools of thought was still appreciated. In the Edo period, apart from Shushigakuha, we can make a list of other parties such as Youmeigakuha of Nakae Toujou, Kumazawa Banzan, Kougakuha of Itou Jinsai, Kourishugiha of Ogyuu Sorai and so on. These parties were applied and appreciated differently in different regions, and it is decisive by each daimyo in each local region. For example, daimyo could employ intellectuals from many different parties to support his society. The central government was never in charge of this task. This leads to flexibility in knowledge of intellectuals in Japan. Moreover, these Confucianism parties were always in conflict, so this made education and society progress. For example, Youmeigakuha was against the policy of fixed classes in the society by the Bakufu government and criticized Shushigakuha for desiring the peaceful society in a serious discipline. However, through a series of discussions, other reserved classes perceived many revolutionized thoughts of Youmeigakuha.

The third thing is education content. The core Confucianism education content is humanistic values. Confucianism aims at teaching humanity to govern the country with an emphasis on training people to become talented and moral citizens. This makes learners self-responsible, willing to strive, self-respectful, moral, and honorable. Basically, Confucianism shares common things in many countries, educating the Five Constant Virtues. However, due to different historical situations and cultural ethnic traditions, if considering details, education content in each country is reflected differently. If China puts more attention on “pious”, South Korea and North Korea focus on “righteousness” In Vietnam, Confucianism favored “propriety”, and Japan is in favor of “loyalty” (according to professor Tshoi Yoshiharu, Japan). In Japan, “loyalty” is the most appreciated moral opinion. In Samurai’s thoughts, loyalty is put first, thus there is a situation that when the lord of Samurai dies, his Samurai will become masterless-Ronin because a Samurai cannot have two lords. These Ronins come to the city for a living and become town intellectuals or businessmen, which made Confucianism in Japan bear “urban” features and education content of Confucianism in Japan easily receive advanced sciences from Western countries. Rangaku (“Dutch Learning”, and by extension

"Western Learning") with its scholars greatly influenced Japanese society. During the Meiji Era, education policy in Japan experienced great changes. Confucianism in this time was considered as a tool to educate ethics, especially educating loyalty with kings. With the spirit "escaping from Asia to absorb western values", Meiji government led a reform encouraging self-cultivation and self-reliance. Three main contents in this period are teaching native language, technological science, and moral improvement.

First, systemization of teaching Japanese in school is prioritized because it is closely linked with establishing and unifying consciousness of the whole nation, a basis to develop scientific thoughts and recognize citizen rights of every people in the country. Japanese leaders learned this lesson from Western countries. In 1902, National Language Research Council (Kokugo Chosa Iinkai) was founded with the main task to systemize Japanese, unify oral and written language, and identify Japanese alphabet system and its transcription. This Council also cooperated with The Ministry of Education to choose textbooks for schools and planned the curriculum of teaching Japanese in schools. From 1900, reading and writing in Japanese was systematically introduced to primary schools with the time occupying more than a half of the whole time of studying in class. Japanese quickly became compulsory subjects in schools and its updated teaching methods were studied, and textbooks were written and edited many times. In less than a quarter of a century, the number of people with literacy in Japan retained the highest percentage in the world.

Second, in the Meiji period education also appreciated teaching technological science. Although in the Edo period there were several schools teaching Western science called Rangaku, studying medicine and natural science in Dutch, and up to the Meiji period, science subjects officially were taught in schools with a clear aim at building the nation of developed economy and strong military. Universities and vocational training schools actively provide lectures on science to supply manpower for industrialization. The fact that foreign teachers taught science and technology subjects, and Japanese students were sent abroad to study is a foundation for the development of science and technology education in the periods later.

Third, to keep teaching moral for students is considered the foremost condition to modernize the society from the perspective of society. In other words, Japanese introduced moral subjects into school to train people to be independent, respect equality, and individual freedom of choice. However, what made Japan more special is that before spreading the discipline of freedom of choice, independence, equality, Japan underwent the intermediate period to moderate Confucian values deep in the minds of every Japanese citizens for a long term with modern moral concepts. Thus, although the moral subject in the Meiji period is considered a modern one, it still included the Confucian thoughts such as loyalty towards the kings and complied with the government. In the following periods, these moral subjects were influenced by nationalism and changed a lot.

In conclusion, with the reformation in school systems, teaching methods, and education contents, the Meiji government built the first-ever-modern school system in Japan, laying a foundation for the development of first-ranking educational system nowadays.

Discussion section 2:

Japan is one of the countries applying positive ethics of Confucianism into education logically. From practical experiences of Japan, we can say that Japan absorbed Confucian thoughts in its own ways and its national features to train people meeting requirements of Japanese society. Thanks to this, Japan quickly escaped from conservative situations of Oriental feudal society (like China and Vietnam) to adjust them to suit the modern world.

❖ *Section 3: Lessons for Vietnam*

The introduction and development of Confucianism in Vietnam and Japan shared some similarities: the time of introduction (around the 3rd and 4th century), and the time of strong development (period to gain independence and unification, around the 8th and 14th century).

Moreover, in the period of early Middle Ages, Confucianism of both countries belonged to the structure of “three religions” and was employed to construct the government, build the loyalty towards the kings and individual moral thoughts. However, due to the differences in history and society, there are some differences in Confucianism in these two countries, including the application of positive ethics of Confucianism into education.

As mentioned above, Confucianism in Vietnam was considered as basic knowledge for entrance tests to the government. Thus, education content was minimized and rigid day by day. Besides, after the positive development in the early stage, examination system in Vietnam moved from the good (freedom of choice and transparency in employing the talent) to the recession and even to the period of favoring qualifications, not talent or using qualifications to buy a position in the government (in the late feudal period). Hence, Vietnam did not have the chance to develop free academic educational system and welcome new modern thoughts. Being left behind and slowly developing in education is the weakness of Vietnam. Nowadays, Vietnam government has tried a variety of ways to reform its educational system. I think that it is the right policy for the development of Vietnam.

Based on studies on the application of positive ethics of Confucianism in Japan and especially educational reformation process since the Meiji period up to now, I think that Vietnam should inherit some practical experiences of Japan in the education development as follow:

Firstly, Japan organized a systematic and scientific educational regime in the tight control of the government (originating from the Confucian thoughts “unified government can secure the nation order, and the juniors obey the seniors”). One of the most important characteristics in developing education in Japan is that educational policies were fully studied and approved by consultative councils and committee. They were also ruled by regulations and legal document systems on education management. Apart from regulations relating to education written in the Constitution, Japan issued a series of detailed laws to organize and manage educational activities and an educational system. Japan kept perfecting their education laws and consistently followed the policy of non-centralization and increasingly decentralized the task in education management. The Ministry of Education in Japan concentrates on the function of education management like making policy, building educational regime, issuing standards of education and inspections. The government, Prefectural Board of Education, and educational institutions have great responsibility and power in education management and education activities control in their field.

Secondly, Japan underwent many education reformations over the historical periods. Reformations in Japan were launched in accordance with PDCA process (Plan-Do-Check-Act). When Japan made any reformations on education, the objective of each reformation was defined clearly, its results were checked objectively, and unresolved problems were raised to continue correcting. Japan appreciated the whole process and directed to the target of perfecting educational system.

To do these things, annually along with defining which plan will be carried out, the Ministry of Education in Japan will summarize main tasks in the previous year and check whether these tasks were fully done, whether these tasks were carried out as planned, whether the targets were achieved and continue applying what successes of the previous years into the coming plan in the upcoming year.

Moreover, local institutions also need to consider the education plan of the government to launch it accordingly in the region and to define basic plans for the education development for the region. All factors in the society make an active contribution to the government’s educational plan.

These educational reformations of Japan not only correct their weakness in education in the past but also create a condition for the education development of the whole country, making a significant contribution to the development of eco-social in general and gradually build a firm position in developing education in comparison with other countries in the world.

Thirdly, although Japan is a developed country, education contents of Japan still preserve its traditional values. It is easy to recognize the influence of Confucianism towards the education development in Japan, particularly in teaching moral. Teaching morals in Japan centers on three points: life-respect, social and individual relationship, and thoughts on vertical orders. This is a strict orderly society and a vital factor to the stable development in economy and society of Japan. What makes Japanese educational system successful is that this order is transformed into organizations in the society, including schools and is changed suitable for each specific target of the organizations. This order is originated from Confucianism, and family members of varied generations are connected together by natural emotions rather than power. In this feature, Japan is considered as a pseudo-family society. Schools help students recognize their self in the relation with a family or other members of many ages in the society. Children are taught to help younger ones in school or at home and show respect with the elder. This attitude is developed into the responsibility of each individual suitable with their position and their age in the family or society. Unlike other countries teaching morals through a subject in the curriculum, Japan carries out teaching morals throughout every subject in schools and daily activities or special occasions. The outline of moral teachings is based on national law system, which all schools from public to private one have to follow.

Discussion section 3: Vietnam can inherit many things from practical experiences that Japan has drawn in the period of application positive ethics of Confucianism into education development to build Vietnamese educational system more effectively.

5. Conclusion

Like many other countries in the world, educational system of Japan was founded with the process of perceiving many external thoughts, including Confucianism. Many positive values of Confucianism were effectively employed by Japan such as educational thoughts, contents, methods, and management.

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