

Book Review

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Book Review

All cultures are unique and present different systems of worldview and global understanding. It is especially relevant to Confucianism, due to a fact that it is characterized by a number of elements and aspects that are absent in Western culture. The current paper provides a review of a book “Confucius Lives Next Door: What Living in the East Teaches Us about Living in the West”, written in 2000 by T. R. Reid. The author focuses on his personal experience and outlines the worldview of people in Japan. He demonstrates that contemporary Japanese culture is built on the ideas of Confucius and consistently applies it to all spheres of public and private life. Japan serves as an example of a country, where there is no contradiction between material well-being and spiritual development of a person. Japan shows that Confucianism may be highly relevant nowadays. Therefore, Reid suggests that Western countries should also learn helpful things from philosophical system of Confucianism.

Reid explains that the influence of Confucianism may be observed in various daily situations as well as in people’s traditions and behavior. Probably, family relationships in Japan are the most evident example of this influence. The author states that these relationships are much stronger, if compared to the family relationships in Western countries, due to a fact that “Asian couples are much more likely to stay married than couples in the Western democracies” (p. 25). Hence, Asian people are much more responsible in this context than representatives of the Western culture. The author believes that better understanding of Confucianism may be useful for people all over the world, due to a fact that fundamental human values and principles are universal.

Positive impact of Confucianism is observed not only at the micro-level, because the entire functioning of Japanese society is largely influenced by Confucian perception of reality. Reid explains that average rates of crime in Asia are significantly lower than in

Europe or North America (p. 22). It demonstrates that people comprehend the significance of mutual respect and tolerance in their interactions with other members of the society. Mostly, Japanese people respect the rights of other people and prefer to treat others in a mutually beneficial way. It does not mean that this kind of the society does not experience any conflicts. It merely means that people follow generally accepted rules and believe that moral principles should govern their behavior. It seems that no long-term positive results may be achieved if everything is based on the threat of punishment. People should consciously choose the appropriate mode of behavior, and act in a universally preferable way.

Reid also demonstrates that level of drug use in Asia is very low (p. 23). It seems that Asian people do not suggest that it is either necessary or desirable to influence one's physical, emotional, and mental state through the use of drugs. They understand that any changes in people's worldview may be effective only if they come from reflection and meditation. Therefore, they rely on traditional Confucian techniques and consider drug use and similar methods to be artificial and contradictive to a human nature. Therefore, this perspective may be highly useful for a large number of Western people who seek some short-term gains through the drug use.

Reid's personal experience fully supports abovementioned considerations. He also states that the respectful attitude of children towards their parents and other people significantly differs from those patterns of behavior that are widespread in Western countries. Even though, some representatives of the Western culture are also polite and show respect to others, these principles are not as deeply inherited in comparison with Japan or China. Asian people seem to believe that happiness of others is necessary for the attainment of their happiness and spiritual well-being. They do not suggest that interests of people are antagonistic. All of them can be effectively balanced and harmonized. Therefore, Asian people do not aim at acquiring any benefits or privileges at the expense of others.

The abovementioned worldview is one of the reasons of the low differentiation of income in these countries. The living standards of all people are approximately equal, and they enjoy similar social and economic opportunities. It shows that Asian people do not suggest that wealth is the sense of life, and they should devote all their energy to its maximization. They also respect the rights and desires of others and try to help them enjoy decent opportunities. Despite these principles, the economic growth in a large number of Asian countries after World War II is unprecedentedly high. Thus, they are able to achieve the balance between material and spiritual development.

The 5 Confucian key relationships are clearly presented in all spheres of Asian life. First, people interact with each other as a ruler and a subject in some cases. The rights and obligations of parties are strictly determined. Second, relationships between such people, as a father and his son, are also highly important. Third, the relationships between elder and younger brothers specify the role of elder relatives in helping younger ones. Fourth, the relationships between a husband and his wife are not absolutely equal as some male dominance is assumed in traditional Confucianism. Fifth, the relationships between friends are equal and mutually beneficial. Corresponding 10 Appropriate Attitudes are largely encouraged in Confucianism.

The Doctrine of the Mean is also highly important, because it demonstrates the potential threats of supporting any radical views. In this case, an individual might neglect some significant issues, and as a result would not be able to recognize his own mistakes. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze all situations and questions objectively, and not to be governed exclusively by emotions. The Rectification refers to understanding the proper functions of things and correct patterns of one's behavior. If these ideas are correctly perceived, people might reach social harmony. Thus, Confucianism stresses the interests of other people in one's behavior and happiness.

It seems that a high integration of social and economic aspects of Confucian worldview may be highly useful for people, who belong to the Western culture. Nowadays, a large number of people believe that they have to choose between material well-being and spiritual development. As a result, the majority of them prefer financial advantages over spiritual values. Confucianism provides the patterns for achieving the necessary internal balance. Consequently, people will not have to sacrifice any of their values; the main task is to harmonize these values properly. This objective can always be achieved, and Confucianism offers several effective options.

The relationships in Asian families have made the strongest impression on me. On the one hand, there is a strict hierarchy, and parents have more rights than their children (regardless of the children's age). On the other hand, there is an atmosphere of mutual tolerance and respect. The inclinations and preferences of others are respected as far as they do not contradict to the interests of other members of the society. In my opinion, this understanding of people's communication and interactions with each other should be promoted in all countries and regions of the world. In general, this book by Reid is highly insightful and contains a number of helpful observations about Japan and Confucianism. It can be useful for people interested in this ancient philosophy as well as for those who search for reliable solutions to the main social and economic problems of the 21st century.

Reference

Reid, T. R. (2000). *Confucius lives next door: What living in the East teaches us about living in the West*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.