

Gender, Modern Japan, and the Reception of Confucianism

Noriko Sugano

Introduction

After reaching Japan via the Korean Peninsula in ancient times, Confucianism went through several phases before its influence on society rapidly expanded when Japan entered the Edo period (from the 17th century onwards). During this time it had a strong bearing on the training given to policymakers and as teachings in morality and etiquette for the general warrior class.

As Japan entered the 18th century, scholars emerged from various social ranks and positions, which led to lively debate and research into Confucianism. Confucian ethics was also preached through easy to understand texts and lectures. It was disseminated widely among the general populace in a form popularized by scholars such as Baigan Ishida, Yugaku Ohara, and Sontoku Ninomiya. Confucian thought spread among both men and women alike, but for women, Confucian ethics was preached in the form of manuals called *Jokunsho*, which were edited collections of lessons or precepts to instruct women. The main point of these teachings was to harness women within the constant patriarchal *kafucho* system based upon the *gojo*, the five cardinal Confucian virtues of benevolence, justice, politeness, wisdom, and fidelity, which were regarded as essential for maintaining interpersonal relationships. Confucian family morality, in which emphasis was placed on relations between the husband and wife,

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parents and children, and wife and parents-in-law, was enforced from a perspective of upholding the *Ie seido*, or household system, that promoted the continuation of the household as a basic unit of society.

The leading example of this kind of manual for women is the “Onna Daigaku” or “Greater Learning for Women.” This work exemplifies Confucian family morality, including the *Shichikyo-sanju*: the *Shichikyo*, the seven reasons for which a man may divorce his wife (she does not obey his father and mother; she is lecherous, jealous, has a nasty disease, is barren talks too much, or steals), and the *Sanju*, the three people a woman must obey (he own father in her home before marriage, her husband after she is married, and her children after her husband’s death). In principle, these defined how women in the Edo period should act and behave. These directives continued to do so from the middle of the Shogunate right up until the Meiji Restoration (1868). However, the social situation underwent a great change when Japan entered the Meiji period.

The influx of Western culture changed the shape of Confucianism as it had existed until then. As I mentioned in the outline of this topic, if the first era of this change is the time from the end of the Shogunate to the Meiji period, then the next era comes after the Second World War. In this presentation I would like to examine the period sandwiched between those two eras, and then later aspects, by looking at the debate surrounding the criticism and the counter-criticism of “Onna Daigaku.”

Yukichi Fukuzawa’s Theory

Fukuzawa criticized Confucianism in many of his writings. Here I shall narrow my examination down to his criticism of “Onna Daigaku” He wrote “Nihon Fujin Ron” (“On Japanese Women”) and “Nihon Fujin

Ron Kohen” (“On Japanese Women Continued”) in 1885, and “Nihon Danshi Ron” (“On Japanese Men”) in 1889, in which he criticized the Confucianism as seen in “Onna Daigaku.” Later on, he put these works together in the “Onna Daigaku Hyoron” (“Critique of ‘Onna Daigaku’”). Fukuzawa also wrote “Shin Onna Daigaku” (“New Onna Daigaku”) as an educational manual for women. This was in 1899.

The main points of Fukuzawa’s criticism are:

- 1) The Confucian Yin-Yang theory that defined men as Yang (light or positive) and women as Yin (dark or negative), thus laying the framework for male dominance over women, was ridiculous.
- 2) As “Onna Daigaku” is the work of a man, it is written to serve men.
- 3) “Onna Daigaku” conforms to the ancient style of Chinese Confucianism. It is doctrine laid down for women, so it confines only them within that doctrine.

With regard to the first point, he wrote that the Yin-Yang theory is no more than a Confucianist fantasy. Fukuzawa argued that “in a time of ignorance and illiteracy, people took a general look at everything in the universe and saw that there were always two things that were similar. One of these seemed stronger and more vibrant; the other seemed weaker and quieter. *So* they merely went ahead and arbitrarily called one “Light,” and the other “Dark.”

With regard to the second point, Fukuzawa asks whether, when conforming to the propositions in “Onna Daigaku,” we should try switching men with women. He then goes on to say that he highly doubts that men would accept this role-reversal.

In his final point, Fukuzawa says that there are some virtues mentioned that he can agree with insofar as they go. However, the problem lies in forcing these virtues “persistently and cruelly” on women alone. If there were rules for both men and women alike,

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instead of just rules enforced only on women, then he might not necessarily reject them.

Fukuzawa presented the “New Onna Daigaku” as an educational manual for women based on his opinions. He subjected Confucianism to his own particular criticisms while examining the relations between men and women revealed in “Onna Daigaku” as shown above. In this essay Fukuzawa proposed that:

- 1) When a man and woman marry, they should make a home and avoid as much as possible living with their parents.
- 2) The parents of a bride-to-be should provide a basic amount of wealth so that she can be independent; in other words, the bride (woman) must be financially independent.

These proposals were received by many women and led to the first appearance of the “New Wife” and the “New Woman” in Japan.

Hokudo Hirahara’s Theory

What sort of repercussions did the publication of Fukuzawa’s “Critique of ‘Onna Daigaku’” and “New Onna Daigaku” have among women? Let us now take a look at some of the effects as seen through Hokudo Hirahara’s “Shinchu Onna Daigaku” (“New Commentary on ‘Onna Daigaku’”). This book was published on August 18, 1941, but, as can be seen from the fact that it was republished little over a month later on September 21, 1941, it became widely popular in a very short space of time.

According to Hirahara, Yukichi Fukuzawa wrote the “Critique of ‘Onna Daigaku’” to “promote the American and European style of freedom for women, and to reject from a standpoint of independence the principles of sacrifice unique to the Orient,” but that he (Fukuzawa) failed completely in this endeavor. Hirahara claimed that girls who are

not raised according to the “Onna Daigaku” method would not conform to the Oriental household. He also claimed that as a result of Fukuzawa writing the “New Onna Daigaku,” the style of education promoted through the original “Onna Daigaku” had become distorted. Consequently, Hirahara believed that, “the fact that many graduates of female higher education establishments and special schools for girls, who had gone as brides to rural areas, are not on good terms with their new family, with their new family is a result of ignoring the ‘Onna Daigaku’ style of education which conformed with our nation’s social structure.”

The reception of the “Onna Daigaku” style of Confucian ethics (which controlled and defined women throughout the Edo period), appears to have changed due to the impact of several factors. These were the introduction of western culture in the first half of the Meiji period as well as the resulting reevaluation of Confucian ethics due to the influence of this introduction of western culture and by the writings of Fukuzawa, which were put together between the 1870’s and 1890’s. The change was due to a critical attack, which renounced the existence of the old household system.

However, these developments did not necessarily permeate right through society at that time. There was considerable opposition from all sides. One such example of this is the appeal by Hirahara for a revival of Confucian ethics along the lines of “Onna Daigaku,” It must, however, be added that he did not just cry out for a restoration of “Onna Daigaku.” At the end of his book he added a section titled, “Otoko Daigaku Wado Kun” (“Lessons in Harmony for Men’s Learning”). In this Hirahara wrote that violence should be prohibited, the husband should be kind and compassionate, that chasteness should not be required only of women but also of men, and that as the man’s

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chasteness is the basis of harmony in the home, there should be no secrets between the husband and wife.

It perhaps should also be noted that he also described quite practical aspects, such as that the husband should avoid doing anything that might cause the wife to be jealous as “mental worries in the wife when she is breast feeding her baby are reflected in her milk,” and that this would have an effect on the nurturing of the child. Similarly, Hirahara stated that “apart from any capital required for business projects, all other money should be entrusted to the wife.”

However, with regard to women he basically proposed a complete revival of the Edo period “Onna Daigaku” and claimed that his book should be used as a supplemental guidebook for the education of women. It may be said that this resulted in the wide-ranging popularity and penetration throughout society as shown above. Since then, Confucian ethics in the style of “Onna Daigaku” continued to be mainstream until after the end of the Second World War. Perhaps proof of this is the fact that for many people who received their education before the war, regardless of whether they are men or women, the mention of “Onna Daigaku” will, to a certain extent, conjure up images of its system of values.

However, as a result of a major change in Japanese values after the war, a reexamination was called for of the “Onna Daigaku” that had up until then defined women. I will now take a look at this movement through a review of Zennosuke Nakagawa’s “Criticism of ‘Onna Daigaku,’” which was published in 1952.

Zennosuke Nakagawa’s Theory

The base point for the second era was the proclamation of the new Constitution. Article 24 prescribed parity between husband and wife,

equality between the sexes, and respect for the individual in domestic life. A revision of the Civil Code was also undertaken along with the introduction of the new Constitution, and the *Ie seido* the household system that had existed up until then, was abolished. This change was also a rejection of the Confucian family morality that had hitherto controlled male-female relations seemingly as a matter of course. However, the resistance from the conservatives in Japan against this change was considerable. Arguments for the revival of the household system were frequently raised, as well as demands for reform of the new Civil Code. Furthermore, in villages and towns, in rural districts where the forces of tradition were strong, the new way of thinking did not immediately permeate into society. There was a relatively strong tendency among people more familiar with the old customs to look back fondly at the “Onna Daigaku” type of Confucian ethics.

Against this background, Zennosuke Nakagawa carried out an examination of “Onna Daigaku,” which “had been like a Bible for women.” His work covered the time up until World War II ended and aimed at seeking out how a new household should be. I want to bring attention to the fact that a problem like this was focused on so soon after the war had ended. Although Japanese values had shifted enormously as a result of the new Constitution coming into effect, under the surface, a sentiment which could not fully reject the old “Onna Daigaku”-based Confucian ethics still continued to smolder.

This lingering attachment alone may perhaps be regarded as proof of the fact that a way of thinking, which could not reject the mode of male-female relations based on “Onna Daigaku” and its brand of Confucian ethics, had penetrated so widely and deeply into the consciousness of people before the war.

Nakagawa proposed the building of a new family structure through

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his study of “Onna Daigaku.” He carried out a detailed examination of it not to destroy the old household system, but rather to break away from the one based on the teachings of “Onna Daigaku.” Promoting the eradication of all Confucian thought in the “Onna Daigaku” style, he wrote, “I think that male chauvinist Confucian thought, such as in ‘Onna Daigaku,’ and a doctrine that argues for the segregation of men and women, not only makes women into something like slaves, but also paralyzes men’s sense of justice, and gives rise to a vulgar character in them whereby they assist the strong and blight the weak, and this itself may be called a slavish bravery.”

In Conclusion

Through the examination of three different people’s approach to the Confucian teachings for women, I have thus outlined the changes in the reception of Confucian ethics based on the “Onna Daigaku” from the end of the Shogunate and Meiji period to the end of the Second World War. I would like to end by describing how Fukuzawa, Hirahara, and Nakagawa treated men in their texts.

Fukuzawa questioned how it would be if the Confucian ethics in “Onna Daigaku” was also applied to men. While confining women to the world described in “Onna Daigaku,” Hirahara stated that men should be one rank above women, or to put it another way, men should be more “mature” than women. Finally, Nakagawa says absolutely nothing about men. One can perhaps say that this difference among the three shows the characteristics of the reception of Confucianism in Japan during this period.

Fukuzawa criticized Confucianism in order to assess western civilization, which he held in high esteem. However, underneath all this he proposed, from a positive standpoint on Confucian ethics,

eliminating the difference between men and women and bringing about equality by including men in the same confines that Confucian ethics forced on women (with regard to this point, I should mention the conditions in Japanese society at the time and Fukuzawa's opinions on his proposals for monogamous marriage in Japan, but I shall do this separately and not touch on it in this paper.)

Hirahara tried to use Confucian family ethics aggressively to bring about a reform of the situation. Putting it in another way, he deplored the changing social structure in Japan that accompanied the rise of the "New Woman" and the "New Wife." He argued for the revival of Confucian ethics based on "Onna Daigaku," as he tried through this means to restrict women once more and to place men above them. In a certain sense, this could be described as an effort to enlarge the gap between men and women.

Nakagawa proposed sweeping away Confucian style family morality based on "Onna Daigaku" without taking the differences between men and women into any consideration.

Half a century has passed since then. What is the status of "Onna Daigaku" now? If one were to ask students now "what is 'Onna Daigaku'," they might reply that it was a women's university in the Edo period. Times have changed. For modern students who have been educated in equality between the sexes, Confucian ethics and ideas like "Onna Daigaku," which regulated relations between men and women, are seemingly pushed far into the background. However, when they leave the confines of their school or college and go out into the real world, they may encounter it in situation they had not been aware of until then. Of course, the appearance of Confucianism has changed completely.

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Through “Onna Daigaku” we have looked at the period from Meiji up to the present, and found that the Confucian thought that regulated relations between men and women, while going through all kinds of conflicts, still exists even today, in spite of the fact that the disparity between man and woman is narrowing. I shall leave a more definitive description of this as the topic of my future research.

本稿は、2005年6月4日、第13回パークシャー会議（The Berkshire Conference of Women Historians 1930年にはじまる）で報告したものに加筆修正したものである。