Confucian Ideology and Japanese Families: Family Structure and Ancestor Worship

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This report presents a hypothesis that attempts to clarify the distinctive characteristics of the relationship between Confucian ideology and the Japanese family. My primary concerns are the characteristics of Japanese family structure and ancestor worship. Confucian ideology has three principles concerning families: the parent-and-child-centered principle; the father-and-child principle, and the blood relationship principle, and the subject of this report is whether or not these three principles also underlie the Japanese family structure and ancestor worship.

I can offer the following three conclusions. First, in Japan, the widespread traditional husband-and-wife centered family differed in quality from the Confucian parent-and-child centered family. That is to say, not only a Confucian parent-and-child centered ideology but also a husband-and-wife centered ideology was present. Second, in Japanese ancestor worship, although some forms worship paternal ancestors only, forms that worshipped the maternal side, or the wife’s ancestors, were also widespread. This means that ancestor worship in Japan was not always guided solely by the father-and-child principle. Third, in the Japanese family, those who inherit wealth and preside over the family’s ancestor worship are not limited to the children linked by blood relationship, and one heir occupies an extremely important position among the children in the family.

It can be said that the Japanese family and ancestor worship, whether traditionally or currently, have not been determined solely by the Confucian ideology of the family. The Confucian family code of conduct was accepted in some measure after the fundamental structure of Japanese society had been established, so Confucianism never wholly provided for the Japanese family structure and its ancestor worship.