

June 28, 2016

Can *The Path* Really Teach About the Good Life?

By KURANISHI Masako

A few weeks ago, I found an intriguing book review in the Nikkei Shimbun which introduced *The Path: What Chinese Philosophers Can Teach About the Good Life*, by Professor Michael Puett at Harvard University and Christine Gross-Loh. According to the author's interpretation, it seems that the ancient Chinese philosophies could be understood as dangerous thoughts.

The reviewer summarizes the author's understanding of the common ancient Chinese view of life and the world as follows: "People live in unfair society, and their efforts are not necessarily rewarded. The virtue loses, and the evil prospers. Therefore, any pursuit of harmony and of ideal will end up in vain in such a world; thus, in a world of such disorder, we have to make a decision one by one and to become constantly receptive to new things, facing the complexity of circumstance and the irrationality of our fates."

In Japan, Confucianism has been generally interpreted as the lectures that guide people to form a well-ordered society on the basis of the strict moral code indicated by Confucius, though it tends to fall into formalism; and the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangi has been regarded as a kind of naturalism which suggests us to live involuntarily, unintentionally or idly in order to acquire 'Dao' ('Dao' is a natural Providence, which has been often translated as 'the path' in English). Such Japanese understandings of ancient Chinese thoughts are quite different from the author's view.

Prof. Puett's interpretation, however, well explains the view of the world held by the today's political leaders of China, rather than that of ancient China. Their thoughts that the world is perpetually fractured and amorphously fragmented in disorder seems to be the very reason why China has behaved outrageously in the South China Sea. They are eager to construct "the paths" of their selfish desire in order to maximize their interests under the pretext of "self-cultivation" and try to hold them with '*fais accomplis*.'

This book is written as an "enlightening book" for students and business persons. Just by this point, I feel concern over the risk that the more they would be inspired by the Prof. Puett's view of "Chinese Philosophies" and would come to

conduct themselves self-righteously in the real world, the more they would disrespect the law and order to achieve their individualistic purposes. Then, such people would not care anything about the trouble to others.

Anyway, one thing is clear that ancient Chinese philosophers, Confucius, Mencius, Laozi, Zhangzi, and Xunzi deplored somber realities of their days in China. With taking up their ink brushes, they tried to show the ways of how people can live morally and virtuously in good order (Nevertheless, historically some scholars and philosophers have pointed out some substantial defects in them). Considering their discernment of the intrinsic issues of their nations and communities, it is extremely doubtful if all of ancient Chinese philosophers suggest us to accept distressful “fragmented worlds and messy real life” as they were, and encourage us to behave as China is doing now.

(This is the English version of an article written by KURANISHI Masako, Political Scientist, which originally appeared on the e-Forum “Giron-Hyakushutsu (Hundred Views in Full Perspective)” of GFJ on May 31, 2016.)