

The Doctrine of *Houon* (Repaying the Debts of Gratitude) in Japanese Buddhist Thought and its Role in Labor Ethics Formation

Lyubov Karelova

THE formation of labor ethics in Japan was taking place along with the imbedding of labor perceptions in the context of Confucian ethic and political rhetoric, as well as Buddhist and Shinto religious-ethical doctrines. Concepts of the Confucian and Buddhist teachings were specially adapted to the sphere of labor activity.

It should be noted that the development of the Japanese Buddhist ethics was taking place within the channel of the tendencies that had already outlined within the Chinese Buddhism. If in China the Buddhist ethics was considerably influenced by Confucianism, in Japan the Buddhist teachings received considerable impact of both Confucianism and Shinto. Confucian philosophy oriented to this world and concentrated on reaching happiness and prosperity in this life, to great extent determined the character of both Chinese and Japanese Buddhist teachings, that presupposed the possibility of becoming Buddha in this world and even in this very body, and stipulated the appearance of the ideals of «the world asceticism», equally referring to the monkhood and to the laymen.

On the other hand, the life-asserting world view of Shinto also promoted the Japanese Buddhism's orientation towards salvation without exceeding the bounds of this world and within the frames of everyday life.

At the first look, the maxims of the Japanese labor ethics seem alike the Protestant ethics, based on the religious doctrines of Luther and of Calvin. Ethicizing professional labor and «the world asceticism» were equally characteristic of the Protestant ethics and of the labor ethics of Japan. In both cases, industry, honesty and thrift were recognized as central virtues. Property, wealth, profit were estimated from the viewpoint of justice or injustice of their origin and their usage. Achievement of material wealth was considered as criterion of zeal and diligence while passiveness and idleness were decidedly condemned and constant perfection in one's professional activity was perceived as moral requirement. Usefulness for society was considered to be the principal value orientation of labor.

Notwithstanding the external similarity of the moral principles of the labor ethics in different cultures, they differ in their correlation with the basic values and peculiarities of national cultures and, accordingly, in their labor motivations. Here one can find the sources of the stability and of the intensiveness of these motivations.

The most important characteristic feature of the Japanese labor ethics is the sense of duty as its basic principle. This was inspired by the type of the identification of the individual as of integral part of a social entity (such as family, household, community, social estate, nation). The partitive individual is inside the multi-layer system of mutual dependencies.

By contrast to the Protestant ethics, which regards the external world as certain material that should be transformed, in the Japanese ethical system the labor concept first of all appeared as a means of social harmony and of adaptation to the existing order. If in the Protestant ethics, the individual was perceived as an independent entity (in his relation to the God) and the main attention was concentrated on the problem of his/her rights and interests, his/her labor was the way of being agreeable to the God, accomplishment of the task set by the God. On the contrary, in the Japanese traditional labor ethics, man was always perceived as part of some group, of which the aims and interests became his own, and, consequently, as the central problem was presented his implementation of his duty. Therefore, the labor values, as it may be observed at the examples of the Japanese ethical teachings of the Tokugawa epoch, had first of all a collective character. And a separate man was regarded as part of a certain labor community and he found satisfaction, first of all, in the fulfillment of his duty and in adequate social approval. And though today Japanese society is under the very strong influence of globalization processes, that dictate depersonalizing contractual relations, it is still a collective subject in a form of a certain spatially-temporal continuum that constitutes the basis of labor ethics.

Labor in Japan was traditionally regarded not as much as a system of mutual needs and interests, but as a sphere of realization of mutual duties. This fact laid an imprint on all aspects of the labor ethics, as on labor motivations, on moral requirements to the style of behavior in the process of labor activity, as well as on the relevant links among people.

Significance of the duty concept as social and cultural archetype of Japanese culture was very convincingly expressed by Ruth Benedict in her book «The Chrysanthemum and the Sword», where we read: «Man is not only debtor of the past, every day any of his contacts with other people increases his duty in the present. In his everyday decisions and actions he must be guided by this duty. And that is the starting point of

his behavior... The justice is determined in Japan as comprehension by man of his place in the long chain of mutual duties linking together both his ancestors and his contemporaries».¹

This special feature of the Japanese labor ethics originates in many respects from the Buddhism of Mahayana and it is expressed, in particular, in the doctrine of *houon* (repaying the debt of grace). According to it, man devotes himself entirely to his occupation in order to endless repay with his labor the debt of grace to Buddha as well as to the parents, to the state and to all the living beings, thanks to which he appeared in the world and is making use of all its graces.

The doctrine of *houon* greatly helped the formation of the strong deontological component of the Japanese ethics. This component consists in the decisive role of duty in moral behavior, in the priority of duty as the basis of morality. Different aspects of carrying out of one's duty through intensive labor were expressed in the teachings of Japanese thinkers with the help of this Buddhist doctrine in conjunction with such key categories of Confucian ethics, as benevolence, loyalty, filial piety.

The principle of *houon* (repaying the debts of gratitude) or *ongaeshi* (literally: «returning the debts of gratitude») expressed the state of being obliged to people and to other fellow beings, without whom the human life is impossible, as well as the need of properly repaying for their graces. The doctrine of *houon* in Japanese culture originates to mahayanist sutras—«Meditation on the True Dharma Sutra» (Jap. «Shobonenjo-kyo»), which was translated into Chinese by Indian monk Prajnyaruti in the 6th century, and «Mediation on the Mind Ground Sutra» (Jap. «Shinjikan-kyo»), which was translated by Indian monk Prajnaya in the 8th century. According to these sutras, all living beings get four kinds of graces (*shion*), which they must return to the world. [The first of these two sutras refers to such kinds of graces—the graces of father, of mother, of Buddha Nyorai and of the teacher of the Buddhist law; and the second Sutra—the graces of parents, of all living beings, of the ruler of the country, the graces of the three treasures—of Buddha, of the Buddhist Law, and of the monkhood.]

These sutras, expressing one of the cardinal ideas of mahayana about mutual dependence of all existant beings, stressed that interaction with the surrounding world must have in its basis the feeling of gratitude for other people and things that support our life. For a long period of time, these sutras and their teaching about the need of repaying for graces, remained without attention of explicators and commentators. Neither in India, nor in China did they get any development. Nichiren (1222–1282) was practically the first Buddhist thinker who began to discuss the four

graces and in his letter of 1262 to Kudo Yoshitaka—the letter is known also under the title «Shionsho» («The Four Graces Due to Repay») and in a number of other works explained in detail the essence of each of the graces and proclaimed as the life program for each Buddhist and each man incessant return of these irredeemable debts.

After him the situation began to change, and in the Tokugawa epoch different thinkers began to pay attention to this doctrine, commenting it in different ways and placing the accent to this or that of the graces. As a result, it became one of the key principles of Japanese ethics. Moreover, it acquired new life not only in modern religious-philosophical teachings in Japan itself, but also in countries of South-East Asia, for example, in Vietnam—in the Buddhist school of Hoa Hao, or in Won Buddhism in Korea.

It is necessary to mention that Nichiren was the first who started to use the Confucian term of «filial piety» in application to the idea of the gratitude to the parents and who began to regard the feeling of gratitude to the parents as the basis of the rest three debts, including the debt to the ruler. In the Tokugawa period, final synthesis of the Buddhist *houon* teaching with the Confucian concept of duty took place. In particular, the idea of the necessity of repaying for the parents' graces was combined with the maxim of the filial piety, and the repaying the debts to the ruler was regarded as faithfulness of the subject. Numerous works of the Tokugawa epoch were devoted to concrete realization of the *houon* principle in everyday life.

The mechanism of the *houon* principle performance, that constituted the heart of the «filial piety» and of the «loyalty», was regarded in the teachings of the Tokugawa period as directly related to the participation in the affairs of one's household (or *ie*), to mastering and improving the professional activities to which the parents and the forefathers of the household had devoted themselves.

The teaching of the peasant syncretist thinker of the Tokugawa epoch Ninomiya Sontoku (1787–1856) may serve as a vivid example of functioning of the doctrine of *houon* in the labor ethics.

Ninomiya's labor ethics was based, first of all, on a system of values related to the institution of *ie* and agricultural community.

In Ninomiya's teaching one can find, perhaps, the most representative understanding of the *ie* in its temporal perspective. The household and the Family enterprise existing on its basis, were perceived not only as something concretely present here and now, but also as an infinitely developing dynamical essence. The actual state of the household was regarded as a sort of a step, connecting the achievements of the previous

and of the future generations. Therefore, according to Ninomiya Sontoku, the members of the household were responsible for transferring the heritage to the next generations. The idea of infinitely progressing development of the household combined both the economic goal and ethical ideal at once.

Another point that Ninomiya especially stressed in his interpretation of the idea of *ie*, was its role in the identity of man. Each man's dignity was determined, first of all, not by his personal merits, but by his belonging to this or that household, whose actual state and reputation had been created by previous generations. In the *Evening Talks* by Ninomiya one can find the following remark addressed to a merchant by the name of Nakamura: «Born as a descendant of a distinguished family, you, thanks to the merits of your ancestors, have been raised to a high social position. Standing higher than other people, you enjoy their respect... You would better look at yourself. What do you think, are you yourself fit for anything? You are useless... Only thanks to a sequence of good deeds of your ancestors, thanks to their noble birth and high position you are referred to with respect, as a man fit for something»².

Ninomiya's admonition to a man named Takano contains the following dictum: «Although a man acts in the world by the means of his own strength, his possibilities should not be considered his own. Because in reality these are possibilities provided by the position and the salary he inherited from his parents and ancestors, by the authority of the post he has been appointed to. If it were not the possibilities provided by the position and salary inherited by the parents and the ancestors, if it were not the authority of the post, then any man, just like an arrow shot from a badly drawn bow, or a bullet in which the powder has run short, would fall to the grass. People would consider him a fool, good-for-nothing»³. So, a man who let ruin his household, was instantly losing his dignity as a respected society member.

One of the central idea of Japanese labor ethics, closely connected with the *houon* doctrine, was the idea of duty to the ruler and to the state.

The pathos of selfless devotion to the Master in gratitude for his patronage, typical to the samurai ethics and visibly presented in works of such Zen thinkers as Takuan (1573–1645), Hakuin (1685–1768), Suzuki Shosan (1579–1655) e.a., found its reflection in consideration of one's occupation as a service. What becomes understandable in this context, is the emotional intonation that accompanied the recommendations concerning one's labor duties, which called not only to carry out one's duty well, but with outstanding zeal and self-sacrifice.

It is important to note that the majority of thinkers of the Tokugawa period regarded the activity determined by the framework of the occupation (*shyokubun*), as the subject's duty to the sphere of the public (*oyake*), which was associated, as a rule, with the power and the state. Performing a concrete occupational activity, a man promoted the harmony and peace in the state.

The ideal of social harmony, expressed in Tokugawa epoch in the slogan of «rich country and appeased people» has become the highest value promoting national consolidation, and the driving motive of the labor ethics. The guarantee of social harmony was the order and prosperity of each separate household.

In time, this ideal became the starting point for the formation of national goals formulated by Japanese government in the process of modernization and also had the character of general values stimulating people to intensive labor activities. Thus, in the periods of Meiji and Taisho national unity under the slogans of «rich country and strong army» was subordinated to the goal of rapid modernization for the sake of keeping state independence under the conditions of tough competition with the Western powers. After the WW-2 and the American occupation, the idea of Japan's reaching the level of the leading world powers was put forward.

At the same time, in connection with labor relations, Japanese thinkers elaborated such aspect of the *houon* principle as gratitude for «all living beings». This aspect was often formulated as the debt of gratitude towards the society, towards the people of the world (*seken*), who were consumers of the labor products.

For example, early Tokugawa epoch Buddhist thinker Suzuki Shosan, who derived from the Soto-Zen tradition, paid special attention to such a significant component of *houon* doctrine as unconditional duty towards all the living beings (*shujo-no on*). The development of the *ongaeshi* idea one can find in his treatise «Moanjo» (“A Staff for the Blind”), where he, for the first time, connected the performance by each man of his occupation with his moral duty, and thus gave the direction for further comprehension of labor relations from the viewpoint of ethical problems. Suzuki Shosan singled out four kinds of graces, placing them in the following order: graces of Heaven and Earth, graces of the teachers, graces of the master and graces of the parents. Into a separate category he put the mutual graces of all living beings, to which he referred the graces of representatives of all occupations, determining their mutual obligations: «There exist graces of peasants, graces of artisans, graces of producers of clothes, graces of the merchants, the graces of mutual

interdependence of all occupations. If you understand this well and truly, you won't separate from people»⁴. So, he announced as the moral purpose of each man the returning of the graces he had received to the world of the fellow living beings.

The principle of mutual help and of mutual dependence is formulated in his work entitled «Roankyō» (The «Ass' Saddle» Bridge) in the following way: «All in the *saha* world (perishable world.—*L.K.*) exist thanks to mutual help. So far as I dwell in the *saha* world, it will be wrong of me if I did not as well support the existence of others»⁵. In «Shokunin nichiyō», the idea of importance of each occupation for the well-being of all the world is explained in the following way from the viewpoint of the Buddhist teaching: «There cannot be any activity outside Buddhist practice. The proof is that everything one does is for the good of the whole world... The one Buddha, the Tathagata originally awakened, benefits the world by dividing himself into countless millions of parts. Without blacksmiths, carpenters, and all the other artisans, the needs of the world would never be satisfied. Without samurais, the world would not be governed. Without farmers, it would not be fed, and without merchants, nothing in the world would circulate freely. Any other occupation, as soon as it appears, begins to serve the world. There are men who have discussed of Heaven and Earth, there is the man who invented written language, and also the man who invented medicine, having differentiated five principal organs. Although these achievements that have emerged in great multitude, exist for the benefit of the world, they are nothing but the manifestations of the grace of one Buddha in action»⁶.

The fourth kind of moral duty towards the three treasuries—Buddha, dharma and sangha,—in distinction from the initial Nichirenian treatment, in which the main accent had been made on the fighting against false teachings and on the propagation of the true teaching of the «Lotus sutra»,—also began to be interpreted by Suzuki Shosan as incentive for labor activity, which he estimated higher than meditation within the walls of a monastery.

The dominant role of duty in Japanese labor ethics has to a great extent predetermined such its characteristic feature as large personal responsibility of the subject of labor activity to the social group he/she belongs to and identifies himself/herself with—to the society, to the nation, to his/her inner and outer circle. Particularly, this phenomenon has found its expression in interpreting each person's labor activity as his/her service to the state as an state official. [The problem of responsibility of business to the society is the central one in Shibusawa Eiichi's

teaching.]

One more distinctive feature of Japanese labor ethics is the emphasis on the importance of the small, on the attention to details, on each individual's responsibility for every—even insignificant—piece of work. The value of labor of any particular small person increased in connection with the responsibility carried by this or that individual. Meanwhile, this responsibility for the wealth of the nation and for the well-being of a corporation was equally shared by rank-and-file subjects and representatives of the elite.

Further on, having become the basis of corporatism of a family type, this ethics played the role of a mobilizing factor not only in the socio-political, but also in the socio-economic spheres. Such a phenomenon took place neither in China, nor in Korea. The type of social relations that was elaborated within the framework of this model, became a precondition of the unity of the managers and of those managed, that later turned out into one of the basic features of the Japanese management.

Nowadays along with the process of globalization one can see the numerous cultural hybrids (*zasshu*) emerge. It demonstrates us how archetypal particular features [rooted in linguistic models and in paradigms] of national thinking, display ability to reproduce themselves at new levels, co-existing with new ideas and growing through them.

I estimate as promising the idea of the Russian economist Ye.Z. Mayminas of labor ethics as an inseparable part of the socio-economic genotype of the society, [quote] «which includes the value system, the motivational complex, the paradigm of carrying out economy and management and which manifests itself as an outline of regulation and management of socio-economic processes...»⁷.

Therefore, even in case if Japanese business would totally reject the principles of corporatism and adopt the labor contract system of Western type, the national forms of labor ethics would hardly completely disappear.

There exists already rooted opinion (which is defended, for example, by professor Kawato Akio, former envoy to Russia), that it was nothing else but Confucianism that played decisive role in the formation of labor ethos and capitalist spirit in Asian countries. But this opinion can be put under question as Japan is concerned. In the Japanese case, it was exactly the transformation of mahayanist teachings, and in particular, the doctrine of *houon*, reinforced by the morphologically close Confucian ideas, that promoted the formation of strong labor motivations comparable with Protestant ethics, and of the perception of labor as of the «layic asceticism» including both the monks and the laymen. This is especially

important for the formation of labor values.

Both in the Protestant and in the Japanese labor ethics, strong labor motivations are present. As compared to that, in Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, they are weaker. In Protestantism, labor is equal to a prayer. Similar ideas are to be found, for example, among the ideas of the Zen thinker Suzuki Shosan, who maintained that labor is exactly Buddhist meditation that helps one to open in himself/herself the nature of Buddha. Catholic tradition calls to labor and prayer. Whereas the Orthodox Christian tradition, though it attached great significance to labor asceticism in monastery life, puts above all prayer and fasting (food restrictions). Moreover, in Orthodox Christianity, the ideal of labor service to God was concentrated in the image of a hard working monk. However, even among the monkhood, considerable differences took place in the attitudes towards labor as an occupation suitable for a monk. The followers of Josef Volotsky—the founder and prior of one of the largest Russian monasteries in early 16th century—regarded labor as a form of asceticism, and the followers of his counterpart, a hermit Nil Sorsky, demanded complete renunciation of the earthly life, regarding a monk's duty in inner fight with sins.

According to the researcher of the Orthodox Christian labor ethics prof. Tatyana B. Koval', [quote] «economic and professional perfection remained at the periphery of the religious consciousness: material equipment, technical perfection of labor, economic successes remained out of the field of attention and were not blessed by Christianity»⁸. Nevertheless, such a branch of Orthodox Christianity, as the Old Belief constituted an exception. Patriarch Nikon's mid-17th-century reforms caused the divide of the Russian Church. The Old Believers, who did not accept the reforms and were persecuted by the dominant church and the czar's power, at first constituted 20% of Russia's population. Big settlements of old believers, who searched refuge from persecutions, emerged in the Urals and in Siberia. Their most radical part took to the conviction that the Devil had gained the victory over the Russian church and the state.⁹ And if, initially, the dissidence took place on the ground of rejection of the innovations in the Orthodox ceremonial rites, whereas the basic dogmas of the belief remained unchanged, then, as time passed, new accents began to appear in the Old Believers' worldview. One of them was the emergence of strong labor motivation. The need of defending their convictions and of proving the truth of their belief, as well as the increase of the significance of the problem of salvation of the soul against the background of the eschatological moods [based on the motif of the advent of Antichrist into the world], the Old Believers concentrated on the obser-

vance of «truly Christian mode of life». As a result, a kind of «layic asceticism» emerged. In Russian researcher Vladimir V. Kerov's words, [quote] «in the attitude of the 'fathers' of the early Old Belief to labor, including economic and physical labor, the only new element was the fact that the increasing sacralization of everyday life that had become arena of the struggle for true belief, resulted in spreading of the norms of monastic labor to the labor of 'true believers' among the laymen, who, from now on, were also called to take part in the soul-saving sacred labor»¹⁰. At the border of the 19th and the 20th centuries, the Old Believers adopted a concept of labor as of God's affair. The re-orientation of labor to Salvation, to consolidation of old believers' community and social service was considered as a basic condition of its sacredness.

It is important to note that many well-known Russian industrialists and entrepreneurs, such as Morozov, Ryabushinsky, Shchukin and others, known for their philanthropy and patronage of arts, had old-believers' background.

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In conclusion, estimating the role of Japanese Buddhism in the formation of Japanese labor ethics, let me quote Boston University researcher Gregory Ornatowski who said: [quote] «While Buddhist lay ethics may have helped provide the *necessary* type of lay values for the development of modernization and modern capitalism (in Japan, for example), these ethics were not *sufficient* factors in themselves to propel such development. Moreover, while Buddhist believers and institutions were not initiators of the political, social and economic changes which led to economic modernization in Japan in particular, this does not eliminate a certain Buddhist 'flavor' to the strong work ethic and almost religious view of work which has supported the development of modernization and modern capitalism in Japan»¹¹.

Notes

¹ Бенедикт Р. Хризантема и меч: модели японской культуры [Benedict R. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*]. М., 2004, с. 71.

² Ninomiya Sontoku. *Ninomiyaou-yawa* [33].—Nihon-no meicho, Tokyo: Chuo koronsha, 1983, vol. 26, p. 226.

³ Ibid., pp. 227–228.

⁴ *Suzuki Shosan Dojin zenshu*, Tokyo: Sankibo busshorin, 1962, p. 53.

⁵ Ibid., p. 234.

⁶ Ibid., p. 70.

⁷ Трудовая этика как проблема отечественной культуры: современные

аспекты (материалы «круглого стола»). Labor Ethics as a Problem of National Culture (Materials of a Round Table)—«Вопросы философии» (The Problems of Philosophy), 1992, No 1, с. 3.

⁸ Коваль Т.Б. Православная этика труда. [Koval' T. Orthodox Labor Ethics].—Мир России [World of Russia], No 2, с. 94.

⁹ Зеньковский С.А. Русское старообрядчество: духовные движения семнадцатого века [Zen'kovsky S.A. Russian Old Belief: Spiritual Movements of the 17th Century] М., 1995. с. 341.

¹⁰ Керов В.В. «Се человек и дело его...» Конфессионально-этические факторы старообрядческого предпринимательства [Kerov V.V. "This is the Man and His Deed...". Confessional and Ethic Factors of Old Believers' Entrepreneurship]. М.: ЭКОНИНФОРМ, 2004, с. 410.

¹¹ Ornatowski G.K. Continuity and Change in the Economic Ethics of Buddhism. Evidence from the History of Buddhism in India, China and Japan.—*Journal of Buddhist Ethics*. Vol. 3, 1996.