Is the 21st Century the Era of the East?
On how to Cope with the Major Proposition of the New Century

Kim Choong-Ryeol

Academician, The National Academy of Sciences, Republic of Korea
Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, Korea University

1. Western renowned scholars predicted, “The 21st century will become the era of the East.”

In 1947, A. Toynbee, a British master of historical studies, predicted, “The 21st century will be the era of the Pacific Ocean.” In 1970, B. Russell, a British philosopher, gave his last prediction on his deathbed, “The 21st century will be the era of China.” And both masters’ remarks have been summarized as follows: “The 21st century is the era of the East.” At the very start of the new century, when religious and cultural conflicts mushroomed with mankind at a loss, this proposition, together with the slight, far-reached tolling of the evening bell of the 21st century, has been gradually highlighted in the west as well as the east, and in a tiny region as well as around the globe, by Confucianism, the symbol of the eastern culture, which has been depreciated in its hibernation for as long as 150 years.

Russell came to lecture in China in 1919—1920. Empathizing profoundly with Chinese culture, he indulged himself in its study. Shortly after returning from China, he wrote the book The Problem of China, declaring, “If the living pattern invented and implemented by the Chinese for centuries can be adopted by the people all over the world, it can bring about global happiness.” Toynbee, drastically changed his views on history after he read Confucius “Universal Harmony in the Function of the Rituals”, a passage in The Records of the Rituals (Li Ji). In one of his works titled The Civilization in Experiment, he says, “Chinese scholars have already worked out brilliant answers to the fundamental questions in philosophy and ethics. Confucius’ thought of Universal Harmony, for instance, can be used to replace the war. Confucianism is the most incisive, practical pattern of the human life. Of the various civilizations in the world, only the Chinese culture aims at the pursuit of the world peace and the happiness of the human beings as a whole.”

J. Needam, compiler of Science and Civilization in China, also says in the conclusion of his article titled “Science and China’s Influence Toward the World”, “Chinese society bears a function of ‘interior self-stability’, while the European society possesses an ‘interiorly-installed unstable factor’. The Chinese culture, which is good at self-readjustment, is every bit like a living being, keeping balance in accordance with the environmental alteration. It is similar to temperature adjustor, or the science of manipulation.” The three scholars mentioned above are regarded as representative master scholars in the West in the 20th century.

They, who have foreseen the coming doom of the western material civilization seek in retrospect traditional Chinese culture, especially the thoughts of Confucianism, including the humanitarian spirit, the wisdom of mean, the harmony between nature and man, the human morals of loyalty and forgiveness, etc. They expect that the West will be shaped and forged by Eastern culture in the coming century, before the panics of the 20th century are stopped and rejected and a paradise is created in harmonious coexistence. It is, however, a pity and shame to see
that, in the East nowadays, the fierce tornado sweeping from West to East has devastated the essence of the traditional culture, since various cultural aspects, from ideology to living patterns, have become copies of western materialistic culture. What can be done by our Eastern countries to stay with the scheme that “the 21st century is an era of the east”? It, needless to say, is the resumption of the traditional eastern culture, which is symbolized with harmony and co-prosperity. It is, therefore, Confucianism, or Confucius’ thoughts that should act as vanguard!


Persons living in a fully westernized materialistic environment in the 21st century know more about a whipping, derogative term “the gradual orientation of the western culture” than about a rewarding term “The Chinese Enlightenment to the West”, which can bring pride to Easterners. It is undeniable that the 19th and 20th centuries has witnessed the West overwhelming the East, as such that the furious tides of the western money-oriented civilization are roaring against the eastern civilization. In the 17th and 18th centuries, however, Confucian culture in the east was passively introduced into the west, which evoked certain repercussions, such as the acceptance of the moral value of humanitarianism by the westerners, the revolutions in Britain and France, and the independence of the United States of America, etc. All this has been proven to be true, according to the historical facts and the self-demonstration by the Westerners themselves.

Chinese culture was introduced to the West by Western missionaries, who did it willingly rather than being compelled and driven unilaterally, as was done in the process of the gradual orientation of the Western culture. R. Matthew, who was the earliest missionary coming from the West, arrived in Macao in 1582. After that, more missionaries arrived gradually. Besides their missionary work, they also studied the Chinese Classics and translated the Four Books (Mencius excluded), which were published in Paris. These examples can be seen as a milestone in the history of the Sino-western cultural exchange. In the later years, more were introduced to the history, the geography, the system and the cultural relics of China, of which a book, titled “the Complete Records of China”, compiled by Du Halde, a French Jesuit missionary, and published in Paris in 1735, was happily welcomed by Western scholars. Chinese thoughts, namely, humanitarianism, moral education and scholar politics, among others, have thereby stimulated new tides in the west.

Several famous figures, such as Johnson, an English scholar, Condorcet, a great French thinker (who added Confucius’ saying “Don’t impose upon others those one is unwilling to accept oneself” to the French Charter), and Jefferson, who drafted the Declaration of Independence of the U.S.A., all admitted that they had been influenced by Confucius’ political doctrines. The Chinese examination system and scholar politics in particular have exerted tremendous influences on Western Europe. Thomas Carlyle (1795—1881), a famous English writer, who wrote “The Great and the Adoration to the Great”, published during the very period of the Opium War in 1841, sang high praise for the Chinese examination system and the scholar politics in which the country was governed by scholars. In 1855, a civil official system was implemented in Britain, and then in the United States in 1883. Thachim Bouvet, a French missionary, studied “the Book of Changes”, and, in 1701, showed the findings of his studies to Leibnitz (1646—1716), making the latter exclaim that the Chinese, among whom Confucius could be titled the king of philosophy, prove to be a most reasonable and excellent race as they illustrated in “The Book of Changes” the cosmic phenomena and the human laws with the various collocations of the two symbols yin and yang called the Trigrams. Leibnitz’s theories, such as the Monad Theory and the Universal Pre-Harmony Theory, are generally acknowledged to be the results of the influence of Chinese philosophy.

Why do I revert to the check of old bills? Because many people worry that, when 6 years has passed in the 21st century, we have not yet prepared any designs to cope with the proposition of the new century, and that the prophecy of “the 21st century is to be the century of the east” will become empty words, if we keep on wasting of time. With the historic illustration of “the Chinese enlightenment to the west” mentioned above, however, I believe that, although it appears that Confucianism fails to remain in the western culture, the West has done better not only in preserving the spirit of Confucianism, but also studying it in sincerity. If, therefore, “the Renaissance of Confucianism” appears, it is likely to be more welcomed and promoted in the West than in the East before it has been widespread in the whole world. Hence, the success of the “Renaissance of Confucianism” depends not on the west, but solely on our determination to cope with the proposition.

3. The Rebirth of Confucianism in the West
The recent 150 years we witnessed the sufferings of Confucius. The debasement of Confucius started after the Opium War in Japan. The Japanese, with the intention to break with the eastern culture and to get rid of the last trace of Confucius, said, “Confucius is from China, and is the origin of China’s disasters.” With the success of the Reformation in 1868, Japan, which had imitated imperialism hastily, reverted to attacking its cultural origin by invading China and occupying Korea. China, which had been defeated and humiliated, began to learn from the West, too. In 1919, for instance, the May 4th Movement broke out in China with the negation of the tradition and the overthrow of “Confucius’ Shop”, and with a thorough westernization instead. Half a century later (in 1968) Confucius was still criticized. Why should the debasement of Confucius happen in China, the very origin of Confucianism? Korea, a comparatively conservative country where Confucianism was worshipped, also put forth in 1980 a ridiculous view that “Only Confucius’ death can let the country live”. Confucius encountered such sufferings in the East, where Westernization was blindly chased, the West, however, came to understand the crises of a materialistic civilization, to which the solution was but to search in Eastern civilization. For this a book titled The Limits to Growth was published at MIT in 1972, with the main contents as follows: (1) The world where we live is but the only one; (2) The earth is limited, and the materials are limited accordingly, and, therefore, the economic growth is correspondingly limited; (3) All the temporal alterations are going in circulation, and All phenomena are but alterations rather than developments; (4) There is a law by which, of itself, to keep balance and to maintain harmony in the universal evolution in Nature, and the human interference with the ecological order will wear away the vitality of Nature.

All the four revised ideas conform perfectly to the eastern conceptions, such as that of the limited world, of the things reverting at the end of a process, of the development in alternation and circulation, and of the evolution in spontaneity. It has actually illustrated that Eastern culture can succeed in making up for the extremes in Western culture. Next, we should know that the term of “the East” in the slogan “The 21st century is the century of the East” is not a geographical term, but a cultural one in the general sense. Culture can not be confined to a certain region, but can flow like wind, co-replenishing and co-developing everywhere. The reason why the Chinese culture is the only one that has survived among all the ancient civilizations is that the Chinese culture possesses not the distinction of regions and races, but that of the elegance or crudeness in cultural quality, as is said, “China will be ‘foreignized’ in the foreign customs, and vice versa.” “The remote nationalities will be moulded in the Chinese culture if they come into China.” In history, China has encountered four invasions by the northern nationalities, namely, Liao, Jin, Yuan and Qing, who, however, began to rule the country according to Confucian culture and Confucius’ thoughts the very moment they entered China. They conquered China and were conquered in turn by Chinese culture. Their cultures, therefore, are an indispensable part of the Chinese culture. This is why the histories of the four dynasties governed by the alien nationalities have been compiled into Chinese history, rather than being rejected, which shows the endurance and harmony of the Chinese culture. This is, in my opinion, “culturalism” (globalism) rather than nationalism, as is said by Confucius, “Harmony in differences”, and by Mencius, “It’s fine to endure as many things as possible and harmonize them.”

Thus, the invasions of the northern nationalities, as well as the introduction of Buddhism from India, have just enriched, beautified, and improved the Chinese culture more and more. Similarly, in China’s point of view, the gradual orientation of the western culture will not destroy the Chinese culture, but help to globalize it.

4. Compilation of The White Papers on Confucian Culture as Text and guide of the Cultural Education

Generally speaking, Confucian culture has been shaped along with the formation of Confucius’ thoughts. But Confucianism today is not solely possessed by China, nor is it the patent of the Easterners, but it is rather the common heritage of mankind. Nowadays, Confucianism has only been implemented on the preliminary stage, without being highlighted in politics, society and economy. It, however, has soundly sprouted in academic ideas, humanistic education, and moral cultivation. In 1971, for instance, Confucius birthday (September 28th) was selected as Teachers’ Day in the United States. This is of great symbolic significance as Confucius has been regarded as the most sublime teacher and educator of all human beings. This is different from religion, which can be divided into various sects replenished and endured with each other; while education and academics can rise above all boundaries of countries and nations. Confucius’ thoughts, as well as the Confucian culture, can go beyond all cultural barriers in a universal way. Thus the proposition “The 21st century is the century of the East” is not
necessarily realized in the East. In a sense, it is in the west that it can actually be realized and implemented. As such, I, know for sure that the prophecy “The 21st century will be the century of the East” can be realized someday.

I, on this occasion, put forth a solemn proposal that *The White Papers on Confucian Culture* be compiled not only as the classical edition for Confucianism all over the world, but also as the guide to aid the would-be misled, which refers mainly to the extreme attitude given by such people as Huntington, author of *The Conflict of Civilizations*. There is no reason for the conflict of civilizations, which, in essence, is objective and open with a value of neutrality. Civilization in this case is but religion. The religious conflicts in the West are mainly due to interior causes, which have been clearly illustrated by religious wars in Western history. At the turn of the 21st century, unfortunately, there have been many sets of terrorism. The war menace in the Middle East, in my opinion, is but a religious conflict. There is neither religious war nor the conflict of civilizations in the east. Huntington pictures that the Confucian culture, together with the Islamic culture, is likely to conflict with Christian culture. This suggests a “new yellow disaster”. We can do nothing but debate against such illusion before we succeed in preventing any would-be malicious provoking.