

# Dr. Sun Yat-sen's Pan-Asianism Revisited: Its Historical Context and Contemporary Relevance\*

Chun-chieh HUANG\*\*

Of the many developments and trends of the twenty-first century, the rise of Mainland China not only is the most important but will also have the greatest impact on world affairs. Over the last thirty years of China's economic reforms, its economy has grown by leaps and bounds, and on this basis, China's influence in the areas of defense, politics, and diplomacy has continuously increased. Though social, economic, political, and cultural problems crop up in China one after another, from a world-history perspective, China's present-day situation is similar to that of Japan after the Meiji Restoration in that it finds itself at a historical crossroads. Will twenty-first-century China follow the hegemonic path (*badao*) of the Western powers of the last two centuries, or will it follow the kingly way (*wangdao*) of benevolent government of traditional Chinese culture? The course that China chooses will determine the fate of the Chinese cultural sphere, yea, even the fate of humankind. This lecture will discuss the following two issues: (1) What were the specifics of the pan-Asianism advocated by Sun Yat-sen? What was the historical development of the doctrine? (2) What are the core values of this pan-Asianism? What new insights can this pan-Asianism provide for China's path in the twenty-first century?

This lecture first clarifies how the spirit of the kingly way of Chinese culture received its fullest development under Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925). On November 28, 1924, at Kobe Women's College before the Kobe Chamber of Commerce and four other organizations, Sun Yat-sen presented his address "Pan-Asianism," eliciting much excitement. In this lecture, he first praised Japan's abolishing the unequal treaties at the end of the nineteenth century as the beginning of the revival of Asia. He then compared European culture with

---

\* Speech at the Presidential Forum of the Third Annual Meeting on May 8, 2011.

\*\* President (2010-2011) of the Society for Cultural Interaction in East Asia and  
Dean of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences  
at National Taiwan University.

Asian culture. He saw European culture as a scientific culture focused on utility, as a type of hegemonic culture, and he saw Chinese culture as a culture of humanity, righteousness, and morality, as a culture of beneficent government (*wangdao*). He saw the problems of the world of the 1920s as problems of the comparative differences between, and the conflict between, the cultures of the East and West. Finally, he strongly urged, “You Japanese have already acquired hegemonic Western culture, and yet you also have the essence of the Asian culture of beneficent government. In selecting a world culture for your future, whether you will act as lackeys for hegemonic Western culture or as defenders of the Eastern culture of beneficent government depends on your careful deliberation and prudent selection.” Sun Yat-sen’s notion of pan-Asianism came from a debate on Asianism in Japanese intellectual circles in the early years of the twentieth century. In 1903 the well-known scholar Okakura Kakuzō (also known as Okakura Tenshin, 1862-1913) published in English *Ideals of the East*, in which he asserted that Asia is one and pointed out that Asian cultures seek the purpose of life, whereas Western cultures seek means for living. But in *The Awakening of Japan*, published in 1904, also in English, he hinted at a shift from the thesis that Asia is one to the notion of an alliance lead by Japan. In the currents of thought in Japan in the 1920s, Asianism as a mode of thought was gradually transformed into Asianism as a mode of action and diplomatic strategy. This was the time when Japan most looked down upon China and when Sino-Japanese relations were at their tensest. Sun Yat-sen used the term “Asianism,” a term familiar in Japanese intellectual circles, but he sought to separate it from former associations. He also reinserted into the public discourse on political relations between China and Japan during the 1920s, criticism of Japan’s exclusion of Chinese laborers, echoing the advice of the Chinese Nationalist Party on Japan’s proclamation. In another address on November 28, 1924, in Kobe, he urged Japan to help China abolish the unequal treaties. With his notion of pan-Asianism, Sun Yat-sen urged Japan to abandon its desire to invade China and return to the spirit of beneficent government in the Asian tradition. Even today in the twenty-first century, this idea has renewed significance.

This lecture then points out that in the transition from the traditional to the modern, nearly all regions of the world undergo revolution. China especially suffered greatly over the course of a century. From the Opium War (1839-1842) on, the Chinese, suffering the pernicious effects of invasion by Western powers and the chaos of civil war, wrote a history drenched in blood and tears.

For China, the twentieth century was full of suffering and hardship. In 1900, after the Boxers surrounded the foreign embassies in Beijing, the Qing

court declared war on the foreign powers, leading the Eight-Nation Alliance to occupy Beijing. In 1901 the Boxer Protocol was signed, exacting a pound of flesh from China. In 1911 the revolution broke out, resulting in the downfall of the Qing dynasty. In 1912 Sun Yat-sen took up the position of president of the provisional government of the Republic of China in Nanjing. Yet after the establishment of the republic, hardships followed in rapid succession. In 1915 Yuan Shikai (1859-1916) declared himself emperor, and Japan imposed its Twenty-One Demands on China, exposing its intentions of invading China. In 1917 Zhang Xun (1854-1923) attempted to restore the abdicated emperor Puyi. This was followed by a period in which warlords contended for control and the people were caught up in the conflagrations of war. This state of affairs lasted till the completion of the Northern Expedition in 1928, which resulted in a nominally unified China. But the designs of the Japanese army continued to expand until they gave rise to the Marco Polo Bridge Incident on July 7, 1937, and all of China was drawn into the Second Sino-Japanese War. From 1937 to 1945 China fought an eight-year war of resistance leading to numerous refugees and widespread suffering. Victory in the Second Sino-Japanese War led only to the outbreak of civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists. In 1949 the People's Republic of China was established on the Mainland, the Nationalist Government moved to Taiwan, and China became divided into two. On the Mainland, after a brief respite of eight years, the people then encountered the turmoil and adversity of the Anti-rightist Movement (1957-1958), the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960), and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

But most surprising is that after the Cultural Revolution ended, China, during thirty years of reform and opening up, became a rising world economic power. In 2010 China surpassed Japan in gross domestic product, becoming the world's second largest economy. The splendidly executed Beijing Olympics and Shanghai World Expo offer solid evidence of China's rapid economic development. With support from its powerful, rapidly developing economy, China has already leapt to the world's number one position in the scale of construction, mileage, and speed of high-speed rail. China's rapid economic rise has spurred economic development in the rest of Asia. The Japanese periodical *Shūkan Tōyō keizai* (Eastern Economic Weekly) has reported that in the ten years from 1996 to 2005, international travel in Asia has grown 109 percent, greatly surpassing the 60 percent growth in intercontinental travel, the 67 percent growth in travel between Asia and North America, the 59 percent growth in travel between Asia and Europe, and the 36 percent growth in travel among the countries of Europe. Direct flights between the Mainland and Taiwan are nearly all full. Moreover, of the 19 cities in the world with populations of more than 10 million, 11 are in Asia.

We can expect the rise of Asia to be a new trend in the twenty-first-century age of globalization.

At the start of the second decade of the twenty-first century, China, like Japan in the Taishō period (1912-1926) after the success of the Meiji Restoration, stands at a crossroads of history. Going forward, will China, in its politics, follow the hegemonic way (*badao*) or the kingly way (*wangdao*) of benevolent government? In its social and economic development, will it follow the path of justice or profit? Will it favor the public good or private interest? China's choice will not only determine the fate of the greater Chinese sphere, but will also influence the future of humankind.

A look at the world situation in the twenty-first century shows that after 1989, which witnessed not only the collapse of the Soviet Union, but also the fall of the Berlin Wall and the unification of East and West Germany, the world became politically and economically realigned, and regional economies achieved significant development. With the increasing globalization of the world, nation-states are increasingly becoming deterritorialized (that is, experiencing a loosening of ties between culture and place). At the end of the last century, the late political scientist Samuel P. Huntington (1927-2008), in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996), notes that in the post-Cold War era, fewer and fewer wars are traditional wars fought between nations, that the wars of the future will be between civilizations, and that the outbreak of war will occur at cultural fault lines between different civilizations. Though Huntington's theory still has many points open to discussion, the overall direction of his predictions fits the world situation of the last twenty years. In the new age of the twenty-first century, an age of civilizations mutually affecting each other and engaged in dialog, China's influence in the world will continue to expand. China should not follow the hegemonic path of militaristic expansion and conquest of the past two centuries. Rather, it should follow the kingly way, whose basis is the shared enjoyment of the things of cultural value.

What would be the outcome of following the hegemonic way?

In "Complexity and Collapse: Empires on the Edge of Chaos" (*Foreign Affairs*, March-April 2010), Niall Ferguson (b. 1964), professor of history at Harvard University, points out that the empires of the past were all complex systems consisting of many interacting parts, and that they advanced by alternating between order and chaos. He reviewed how the Roman Empire, the Chinese Ming Empire, the French Bourbon Dynasty, the British Empire, and the former Soviet Union all collapsed surprisingly rapidly. In conclusion, he found that most empires collapse owing to poor management of finances. Ferguson warns in particular that the federal deficit of the United States has already reached 11.2 percent of its gross domestic product as of 2009, that the

U.S. federal debt reached \$800 billion in 2008, and that it is projected to reach \$14.3 trillion by 2019. He fears that the United States is already on the verge of collapse.

Ferguson may be overly pessimistic in predicting the collapse of the United States, but the collapse of the British Empire and the decline of U.S. strength over the last two centuries is closely connected with excess deficit spending, for excess deficit spending is the inevitable outcome of hegemonic politics (such as mobilizing for foreign wars). These historical examples remind us of the meaning and value of the kingly way of benevolent government in the twenty-first century.

In addition to these historical examples of empires that autocratically expand and perish as a result, modern Asian history too offers an instructive case, namely, the rapid rise and defeat of the Japanese Empire. After the Meiji Restoration, which overthrew the Tokugawa shogunate and established a new government centered on the Japanese emperor, the nation greatly revived. In 1894 Japan defeated Qing China in the First Sino-Japanese War and suddenly found itself the dominant power in East Asia. Under the banner of removing itself from Asia and joining Europe (*Datsu A, nyū Ō*), Japan followed the hegemonic path of the Western powers of the past two centuries and sought to establish a Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere centered around the Japanese Empire. Yet in the minds of the peoples of Asia, it left historical scars that even today have yet to heal. The Meiji Enlightenment thinker Fukuzawa Yukichi (1834-1901) once said that the Japanese of his generation, having experienced the great changes of the Meiji Restoration, were of two minds, one schooled in Chinese thought and one schooled in Western thought. Such Chinese schooling, we can say, is East Asian culture, and such Western schooling is Western culture. In the first half of the twentieth century, Japan, guided by its notions of Western culture, followed the autocratic path and invaded its neighboring countries, but eventually capitulated on August 15, 1945, in an unconditional surrender, which brought an end to World War II. As Xu Fuguan (1902/3-1982) wrote in a line of poetry, the Japanese Empire's "designs of hegemonic rule all went up in flames"!

Finally, this lecture points out the following: At a critical juncture in the history of the twenty-first century, Taiwan is well positioned. Located at the border of the Pacific Ocean and the Eurasian landmass, Taiwan has a favorable geographical position. It is the largest island to which Han Chinese emigrate abroad, and it is a hub of East-West cultural intercourse. But more important than its favorable geographical location is its diverse culture developed on a foundation of Chinese culture. Centuries of different governments and peoples have brought to the island new cultural vitality, and together they have produced a cultural symphony that pulls at one's heart strings.

In Taiwan's diverse cultural symphony, the keynote rhythm is the kingly way of benevolent government that richly infuses Taiwan's folk society. This culture of benevolent government, based on the doctrine of the mean, never experienced ten years of chaotic devastation (to wit, the Cultural Revolution), and never experienced the "spiritual pollution" of Western capitalism. Owing to the kindness, compassion, and love found in folk society, any radical political assertion, any radical social or economic policy, has no chance of garnering majority support among the people. With the rise of China in the twenty-first century, this legacy of a culture of benevolent government has become a spiritual resource for the rejuvenation of the people and a common resource for the future of East Asian civilization.