

**EXCERPTS FROM THE Hwasŏ sŏnsaeng munjip: Yi Hangno on
“SINIFYING THE WESTERN BARBARIANS”**

Introduction

Koreans were first exposed to both Western technologies and Catholic religious doctrine via the Chinese-language writings of Western missionaries in China. In the late eighteenth century, the first Korean converts to Catholicism appeared, and their numbers increased to several thousand after missionary priests entered the peninsula and began to proselytize in secret. However, Catholicism (and sometimes Western teachings more generally) were opposed by conservative Confucian scholars and soon by the Chosŏn state for a variety of reasons: because Catholic teachings opposed Confucian ancestral rituals, because Catholics were held to be of questionable loyalty (in one famous incident, a Catholic appealed to foreign powers to send military aid to protect the beleaguered community in a secret letter that was intercepted by Chosŏn officials), and more broadly because of perspectives exemplified by conservative scholar Yi Hangno (1792-1868) in this passage. As a result, throughout the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century Korean Catholics suffered from a series of state persecutions in which missionaries and converts were rounded up and executed in large numbers.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

From *Sources of Korean Tradition*, edited by Yŏng-ho Ch’oe, Peter H. Lee, and Wm. Theodore de Bary, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 140-142. © 2000 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

Excerpts from the Hwasŏ sŏnsaeng munjip:
Yi Hangno on “Sinifying the Western Barbarians”

However, unfortunately the world is such a big place that Europe had no contact with China for quite a long time. ... That meant that, regrettably, Europe was not introduced to the basic principles of the Great Way, and Europeans were not turned into more virtuous people by its civilizing power.

[Translated by Donald Baker]

Questions:

1. What does the “Great Way” refer to and what does Yi think of it?
2. How would Yi’s point of view compare with that of someone from Europe?

Longer Selection with Questions

From *Sources of Korean Tradition*, edited by Yŏng-ho Ch'oe, Peter H. Lee, and Wm. Theodore de Bary, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 140-142. © 2000 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

*Excerpts from the Hwasŏ sŏnsaeng munjip:
Yi Hangno on "Sinifying the Western Barbarians"*

When Chinese civilization encounters a barbarian people, those barbarians are transformed by Chinese ways into a civilized people. Barbarians look up to China and are delighted to receive its civilizing influence. This is the way things are in the natural order of things. This is the way human beings ought to feel. China is like the roots of a plant supplying nourishment for the branches and leaves. It is like the hands and feet that protect the belly and chest of the human body. This should never change. ...

These Europeans come from a land far away from China, so it is only natural that their customs are quite different from Chinese customs. But they have learned all the different styles of Chinese writing and have collected over 3,800 classical works for their library. They can even compose T'ang-style poetry and are able to do so within the constraints that style of poetry imposes. In fact, they write such eloquent Chinese that they have been able to mesmerize many people in China.

The children of peasant households, though they study Confucian writings as hard as they can, can never grasp the structure and organization of those writings as well as children from families that have been studying Confucianism for generations. How much more difficult it must be for men from lands with customs and languages totally different from those found in this part of the world. No matter how clever and bright they may be, Confucian culture is still a foreign culture for them. If they had not studied with a truly sincere heart, how could they possibly have mastered the language as well as they have?

However, unfortunately the world is such a big place that Europe had no contact with China for quite a long time. There was no contact between China and Europe in those years before the brutal Ch'in emperor burned the books of scholars and then buried those scholars alive.¹ There was also no contact between China and Europe when the Ch'eng brothers and Chu Hsi were giving their lectures explaining what Confucianism is really all about.² That meant that, regrettably, Europe was not introduced to the basic principles of the Great Way, and Europeans were not turned into more virtuous people by its civilizing power.

Europe has instead been saturated with a lot of misleading notions, and Europeans as a result tend to spout a bunch of nonsense, criticizing the teachings of the earlier Confucian sages

¹ This refers to the First Emperor of the Ch'in (246–210 B.C.E.). The centuries before the Ch'in was established were China's golden age of philosophy, when Confucius and Mencius were alive and teaching in China.

² Ch'eng Hao, Ch'eng I, and Chu Hsi are the three most important figures in the Confucian revival that resulted in the creation of Neo-Confucianism in China.

and condemning the teachings of later Neo-Confucian philosophers. It appears to be next to impossible to awaken those men to their true inner nature and get them to change their mistaken practices.

Europeans do have a remarkable talent for technology. They easily surpass the Chinese in that area. But that achievement makes them arrogant, and they think that they can convert the whole world to their way of thinking. They need to think again!

The heavens are so vast that the universe appears boundless. Yet we can locate the center of the universe, that point around which it revolves. That is the North Pole. The earth is also quite large, extending so far in all directions that it too appears infinite in size. Yet it also has a center, the site from which the entire earth is governed. That terrestrial center is China. There are also many different ways human beings can behave and interact, so many that they appear countless. But above them all is the Supreme Ultimate, the Way of ways.

The North Pole rules over the multitude of stars, so the multitude of stars all bow in the direction of the North Pole. The center of the earth rules the ten thousand regions, so all of those regions recognize the paramount position of China. The Supreme Ultimate reigns over all creation, so all creation is brought together under the Supreme Ultimate. This is the one principle that unites everything in Heaven, on earth, and among people.

[Translated by Donald Baker]

Questions:

1. What does the "Great Way" refer to and what does Yi think of it?
2. How would Yi's point of view compare with that of someone from Europe?
3. How does Yi understand civilization? Who is civilized and who is not?
4. What is the Great Way, and where might Chosŏn fall with respect to civilization based on its adherence to the Great Way?
5. What are Europe's failings, and what is their cause? For Yi, how and to what extent might it be possible for Europeans to improve?