

Tschun-Mo Rhie: *Zwischen Tradition und Universalität. Eine ideengeschichtliche Untersuchung zu einem neuen Wissenschaftsverständnis in Korea.* With a preface by Du-Yul Song. (Erziehung und Gesellschaft im internationalen Vergleich, 1). Frankfurt/M.: Verlag für interkulturelle Kommunikation, 1985. VI + 362 pp., DM 32.–

Writing about the Korean intellectuals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Dr. Rhie states: "Having set their minds to a renewal of universality, the native intellectuals of the time faced the task of striving for a new identity by coming to grips both with their own tradition and with Western civilisation, which had then started to penetrate the country" (p. 1). At least part of this sentence, as vague in German as it is in English, becomes somewhat clearer by the headings of the last two chapters of the book: "Progressive Unison (*Zusammenfallen*) of the History of Mankind and the History of Nature" and "The History of Mankind as Materialisation of the Man-Nature-Universe (*Natur-Mensch-Raum*)". Such phrases are more than just remote echoes from the thought and nomenclature of German romanticism and philosophical idealism. Although Dr. Rhie ultimately deals with nothing less than mankind, it is not the nomenclature of German idealism by which he elaborates his point, but the course of East Asian intellectual history.

The blame for what went wrong with it, and implicitly with Korean intellectual history as well, is put on orthodox Neo-Confucianism. According to Dr. Rhie the Confucians did nothing but uphold their lore as an ideology that helped those in power to remain in power, and contributed to the separation of man and nature. The panacea for this evil, again in Dr. Rhie's view, lies in Buddhist and Taoist traditions as well as in the guidelines of the Pragmatic School (*Sirhakp'a*) of Korea.

Such views are not new and Dr. Rhie refers (*de rigueur?*) to the names of the people in the vanguard of the new scholarship: Ch'oe Han'gi (1803-1879) and Ch'oe Cheu (1824-1864). The former was an early Korean philosopher and historian of science. The latter, regardless of what his other merits may have been, is more commonly known to have been the instigator and early leader of the revolutionary Tonghak (Eastern Learning) Movement, which struck a severe blow to the Korean polity in the first half of the 1890s. Apart from being the founder of the Tonghak Movement, he is at the same time a remote ancestor of the Ch'öndogyo (Lore of the Heavenly Way), one of the more prominent among the so-called New Religions of Korea. Finding Ch'oe Cheu elevated to the rank of philosopher and scholar, one wonders whether he owes his new position to the possibility of the Lore of the Heavenly Way being dear to Dr. Rhie's heart ... Dr. Rhie would not be the only Korean to have camouflaged religion and politics by what on the surface appears to be scholarship.

It is such a possibility which would, together with the German philosophical nomenclature, again betray Dr. Rhie's deep commitment to intellectual habits of the past. There are more such instances in his book. It is a habit among intellectual historians to strive for comprehension by reference to intellectual antecedents. The effort which is meant to provide insights into a stage-by-stage deployment of the current of thought more often than not turns out to be a re-confirmation of the *déjà vu*. Furthermore, and perhaps even worse, intellectual historians appear to be obsessed by the idea that thought contains the essence of "non-intellectual" reality, and that it is by the study of thought that non-intellectual reality can best be comprehended. In fact, however, rather than being a challenge and response to reality, thought appears to be a self-contained reality itself, which, as it were, deploys itself and "moves" upon its own initiative. Dr. Rhie's book does not leave the well-beaten tracks of intellectual history.

I have to point out a peculiar effect that such habits have on the book: Since the intellectual history Dr. Rhie is concerned with was mainly set in China, his book is mainly – and inevitably – a book about China. More than 76% of the main text has to do with China, and only about 24% with Korea.

In a word, Dr. Rhie's book is thoroughly outdated in outlook. What is worse is that it hardly tells us anything which we have not been told before in countless other books or which readers with even a superficial knowledge of things Far Eastern could easily imagine themselves. What is worst of all is that the book does not tell us much about Korea and thus does not fulfill the expectations which its subtitle suggests. The least Dr. Rhie should have done, in terms of the history of science and scholarship, is to prove the long-term effects the thought of such people as Ch'oe Han'gi and Ch'oe Cheu may have had on twentieth century Korean thought in general. There is no proof of such effects in the book, though the book itself is a proof. However, contrary to what Dr. Rhie appears to believe, it gives evidence of the rather evasive nature of the thought he seems to recommend as a remedy to the world's troubles, and not of its intellectual persuasiveness. It could only be by the evasive nature of his thought that Dr. Rhie could have gone so far as to give such recommendations.

Dieter Eikemeier