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Book Reviews

LOCALITY AND WORLDVIEW


Professor David Nemeth's book is about the formative role of Neo-Confucianism on Cheju Island, a part of Korea located just off its southwestern shore. It should be interesting to members of the ISCSC for at least three reasons:

1. Cheju Island's topography, culture, and history make it an interesting place on the world map worth knowing for its peripheral character;

2. the book brings forward Neo-Confucianism in a different way than others have done, letting us see it in new light;

3. the book shows the difference a world-view may make, among the various factors that make up culture.

First let it be said Nemeth's book is well written, with many illustrations including a number of geomancers' maps, and that he is clear where his evidence is strong and cautious where it is only suggestive. It is based on a number of years of his research on Cheju. There are more typographical errors than one would expect from a major publisher; and an index, even a short one, would help make the discussion more accessible. However, it makes a substantial contribution.

1. Cheju Island is located about 100 km off the Southwest coast of Korea, 500 km east of China, and 200 km west of Japan. About 1800 square km in extent, it is dominated by a single massive volcanic mountain 1950 km high, dormant since 1007 A.D. The soil is littered with many rocks. The coastline is rocky and has few landing places; and the climate is dominated by much rain and by frequent high winds which often clash around the peak of Mount Halla. Three concentric topographical zones are identified: a rocky coastline, a relatively level, gently sloping zone suitable for agriculture (but not for rice-raising), and a more steeply sloping timbered upland area. It is in all likelihood one of the Isles of the Blessed regarded in early China as the home of the immortals known to Taoist legend.

Cheju has been part of Korea since early times, but a refractory part. It has had a reputation for independence; and sometimes was thought fit only to be a convict colony and a place to raise horses. Before Confucianism became dominant Buddhism and shamanism were strong; and they are still present in the coastal zones.

In Yi dynasty times (1392-1910) the influence of Neo-Confucianism was immensely strengthened, in the first half of the sixteenth century, by a series of groups of settlers exiled from Seoul for the rigidity with which they wished to apply their ideas to the shaping of society. In 1948-53 there was a serious uprising against the Syngman Rhee regime during which perhaps ten percent of the islanders were killed. Cheju is close

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enough to Korea to be related to it; but accessibility was in the past limited enough to reinforce its independence.

2. Nemeth’s book lets us see Neo-Confucianism in a way different from its appearance in the work of de Bary, Tu, Chan, and others, who have advanced it primarily in terms of its ideal of personal development, taking the concept of sageliness and seeing what that might mean in a democratic, pluralistic setting. The Cheju cultural landscape lets us see Neo-Confucianism as an agriculturally-based worldview sustaining the life of those who till the ground and raise crops, an organic way of life superseded almost everywhere else.

Briefly, the worldview at work here holds that Heaven steadily showers down its moral energy from above, especially as ordered by its Pole Star around which all the other stars revolve. Heaven seeks to replicate its moral order on all below it. Earth, for its part, has material energy (ch'i) coursing through its veins. Topography serves as catch-basin for heaven’s energy; especially important are the tops of the highest mountains. Masters of geomancy have the technical competence to read the spiritual grammar of Earth’s topography and to correlate it with astrologically determined proper times for human actions. For human life to flourish it is necessary to accomplish a coming together of these various energies. Man’s life must display order, or propriety. This is a matter not only of employing ritual (li), but of actualizing li as a universal principle of harmonious life, intrinsically part of human nature. Man’s tendency to selfish, desire-dominated life must be overcome by hard work, and by acts of loyalty and filial piety. Sincerity is the quality that follows when all the details of life have been brought into an organic harmony with one another, guided by li as the underlying principle of life.

This is done in correlation with Heaven and with Earth. Order within the person as microcosm, and the family and family farmstead as larger microcosm, and on up through the level of Empire to the whole realm of Man’s activity, should correspond to Heavenly order, centered in its Pole Star and proceeding rationally and calmly. Since this order must be actuated cooperatively with the energies arising from the Earth, the difficult topography of Cheju Island represents a considerable challenge.

It is Nemeth’s contention that the Yi Dynasty exiles succeeded very well in ordering the agricultural life of Cheju on a Neo-Confucian basis. (We may note the Puritans of New England as a contrasting example). Personal virtue, the linchpin of the Neo-Confucian worldview, requires making the best possible use of the soil, the climate, and the topography. Nemeth’s thesis is that Neo-Confucianism on Cheju Island is in fact a worldview that is highly successful ecologically. In this full organic context, virtue is optimum well-being in a material and a moral sense simultaneously, even to the point of showing a distinct aesthetic quality in the people’s sense of what land-tending actions are needed to maintain virtue.
Part of the success of the Neo-Confucian worldview is due to its successful educational effort, setting mnemonic signals into the landscape so as to reinforce the lessons taught the children in schools. Hence the title of the book. Nemeth wishes contemporary urban (and posturban) planners to recognize the destructive effect of modern ways of shaping landscape. The Cheju landscape is ordered in a way to preserve human life as an end in itself rather than to maximize profit and loss statements of companies or the GNP of countries, he points out, and thus serves as a hortatory example.

As example of the interactive character of this cultural landscape he cites the pigsty privy, recycling human feces into fertilizer via the privy pig's feces mixed with plant materials, supplying the volcanic soil with just those minerals lacking in it. Another example, lifting stones, served young men in former days in rituals giving symbolic conquest of the stony soil and providing indicators of local identity. A particularly important example are the ancestor tombs scattered about the landscape, sited at points of convergence of Heavenly and Earthly energies as determined by geomancers, without regard for the convenience of agricultural use of the land. Such tombs serve as reservoirs of ancestors' virtue, and as generators of the continuing family's virtue in using the land successfully to support their well being.

3. Cheju Neo-Confucianism indicates the difference an effective worldview may make as a factor of culture interacting with other factors. Here we note the practical importance of the macrocosm-microcosm analogy, particularly evident in Neo-Confucian tradition since Chu Hsi (1131-1200), as this affects Cheju's peripheral location. There is a hierarchy of mountains giving access to Heavenly moral energy along a mountain range leading from earth's central mountain in Tibet, to a secondary one supporting Beijing as the Chinese capital, and to Mount Paektu in Korea as a tertiary point of access. This aspect of Neo-Confucian worldview left Cheju at the very end of the series, perhaps beyond the pale of human habitation because of the width of water separating it from the mainland. A revisionist view championed by the exiles minimized the difference, arguing that the island was connected to the earth-dragon as the tip of its tail smiling back at the head. Worldview here was altered to support political claims of relationship. However, a radical view, locally popular, denies this revision, claiming that Cheju's mountain is so high that it has its own access to Heaven's energy via the Milky Way. In this view, Cheju becomes a separate political center with its own independent rootage in the macrocosm. This view still has its quiet defenders on the island.

The Neo-Confucian worldview thus has considerable energy, deriving from its ability to provide ordering power for microcosms at the family farmstead level up through larger circles of society. However, competing with it today in Korea is a worldview keyed to national economic development in context of global economic interaction. The old Neo-Confucian way of life is under duress from agricultural...
development experts who would prefer to do away with ancestor tombs and pigsty privies in the name of science and efficiency. Perhaps Nemeth's book gives us a last look at the old Neo-Confucian agricultural civilization. On the other hand, we do not yet know how the contemporary interaction of worldviews will come out; nor does Nemeth hazard a guess.

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