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THE CHANGING PEASANT

Part IV: The Confucians

I. The Valley of the Swallows

This guest of summer,
The temple-haunting martlet, does approve
By his lov'd mansionry, that the heavens' breath
Smells wooingly here.

For Korean villagers as for Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, nesting swallows are a happy omen. During the weeks I spent in Jea Bi, the Valley of the Swallows, some 50 miles southeast of Seoul, the tiny birds were just migrating back; they darted in and out of almost every village house with their lightning-quick wingstrokes to remake their last year's nests under the wooden ceiling beams.

Miss Kim, whose name means Faithful Jade but was known as Onion when a little girl and Tiger to her schoolmates, brings ginseng tea. We sit crosslegged at a tiny low table and talk, watching a pair of swallows flying in with bits of straw, almost brushing our heads. Kim, as I shall call her, has tacked a piece of wood under the nesting place to catch the droppings; the two swallows perch and prattle there without fear, well within reach of our hands.

In rural Japan these days, swallows rarely nest any more in the houses; people don't like the bother. In Korea they still do, a small clue to their character, which is still deeply Confucian.

The Valley of the Swallows is small, only a few miles long from north to south; one can bicycle its length in 15 minutes along a new dirt road where abandoned Japanese-built railway tracks used to be. I often do. Like most of the 2.3 million hectares of cultivated land in South Korea's mountainous peninsula, the valley is surrounded by rugged forested hills, such as cover 70 percent of the country; with the hills and tidelands along the coast, only 17 percent of all land is farmed. The hills, eroded since prehistoric times, are rarely higher than 1,000 meters; Mt. Paektu, Korea's highest mountain, has an altitude of only 2,744 meters. Sometimes the peaks are spectacular, with rocky pinnacles, deep, narrow canyons with sheer granite walls, waterfalls and rapids along the streams. But mostly the land is gently sloped and, since the reforestation of the past quarter century, a deep evergreen of pine forest.

One enters the valley from the south over a low pass through forested cliffs; here, towering high on a ridge, is Bright Cloud Temple, where there is a Buddhist nunnery. About 60 shaven-headed, gray-robed women, most of them village girls with high school educations, spend quiet lives in study and prayer, seeking to avoid earthly suffering and seek salvation through renunciation. Buddhism is enjoying a renaissance in South Korea and the temple complex, from its main worship hall to a side chapel with a shrine to the mountain spirit (venerated lest he turn angry with its human inhabitants) has been newly decorated and looks prosperous. In spring its orchards are snowy with apricot blossoms, the pink of cherry trees and the last to bloom, magenta peach blossoms. Far down the slopes of terraced fields is the intense green of the temple's newly planted rice fields. When I first visited it, the road to the temple was ablaze with yellow forsythia, purple azalea, violets, and tiny irises. These abounded in the Valley of the Swallows itself though the tall lombardy poplars along the road were only starting to bud.

At the valley's northern end, in stark contrast to Bright Cloud Temple, is the Dong Kim Leper Colony, a forbidding assembly of long, barracks-like, unpainted poultry houses clustered below an enormous red-brick church. Dong Kim is situated high on a barren, treeless, windswept ridge. We went there one day just at noon and in the bright sunlight life seemed to have deserted the place. Shreds of torn vinyl fluttered from open windows, the stench of chicken manure was overpowering, and what few people we saw hurried into the poultry houses where they apparently lived, as if to hide their deformities. It turned out, a man told us at the churchyard, that all the children and young people had gone to a picnic; he said the village numbered about 300, of whom 130 were lepers; only 5 were still "active" or contagious. A young American Peace Corpsman, the man went on, lived and worked in Dong Kim. But he too was away. He was known only as the "Big Western One;" the Koreans, as is their custom with foreigners, had given him this name (I was to become Grandfather Teacher). Aside from the one man, the other lepers, whom we learned are deeply ashamed of their disease and fear the outsider's revulsion, kept out of sight.

As if protected by the world-negating lepers and nuns, the six or seven villages of the Valley of the Swallows were very traditional. In Kim's village, Cho Dong Kok, or the Village of the Confucian School, two houses

still had roofs thatched with rice straw, just 10 years ago nearly universal in rural South Korea, have today mostly been replaced by brightly painted corrugated iron or composition or much-respected tiles.

Kim's house, built by her grandfather, is roofed with tile, painted a bright aquamarine green. Her father, a member of the rural *yangban* or old landlord-official aristocracy, once studied law in Japan and is the only farmer in the valley with a university degree. Caught up in the Korean-Japanese war and then the 1950-1953 Korean conflict, he never practiced and when peace finally came it was too late. Now 68, he is content in the village and pins his hopes on educating his children; Kim, who looks about 12 years old but in fact is 22 with 2 years at Seoul University in political science behind her,aspires to study law. A small girl, with fresh scrubbed looks and long straight black hair, she appeared invariably clad in blue jeans and a T-shirt saying something like, in English, "Tennis Club" or "Michigan State." Her father told me, "she's my baby."

Kim's family, like many once-rich village *yangban* whose landholdings were brought down to average size in the 1949-1953 land reform (the average holding is now 2.2 acres), sacrifices a good deal for education. Traditionally, entrance into the civil service and social elevation was through examinations, a Confucianist custom that still persists. The village *sangmin*, or former landless commoners, tend to invest more in their own equal-size farms or buy farm machinery.

Elder Brother, as he was called in the family, now 32, commutes an hour daily by crowded bus to a job in a cosmetics company in the nearest city of Suwon. He has postponed marriage until the youngest of the family's 5 children, a 19-year-old boy, enters college. An older sister is married to a professor of history at Inchon University and another sister, after two years of college, also lives at home and commutes to a government post in Suwon.

Kim's house, built by her grandfather, is modest by South Korean village standards. Its walls are stuccoed wattle-and-daub with doors and windows of paper pasted on wooden frames, which slide in grooves. Yellow linoleum covers the floor, the walls are papered, shoes are left outside, and light coming through the white paper produces a warm glow. Like most of the village houses, Kim's is L-shaped, with three *ondol*, or hot floor rooms, heated from flues under the floor of stone and mud. As the pride of her family, Kim has her own hot-floor room for study, with a desk, book shelf, and proper chair. In the other two living rooms, reached across an open wooden-floored terrace, or *maru*, there are chests, cushions, a tiny writing table, a TV set, and a cassette player.

The father hopes to build a new house in a few years because the old-style kitchen, a dank chamber with an earth floor, much lower than the other rooms of the house, is such a hardship for Kim's mother. Once an elegant daughter of the old landed gentry, the mother was given a 12-year classical Confucian education; in her youth there were always household servants and only late in life has she had to spend her days on menial work.

An aura of genteel poverty pervades the household. On the terrace is a framed print of Millet's "The Gleaners" and a terra cotta statue of Buddha; inside the main room are kept big, finely carved rice-chests, three seventeenth-century scrolls honoring Kim's ancestors as members of the hereditary nobility for services to the Confucianist Yi Dynasty, which ruled Korea from 1382 to 1910, and shrines for the tablets of the recently dead. Kim is quick to bring out the photograph albums of her school days; segregation is evident; the color snapshots are all of girls just as those in Elder Brother's album are all of young men.

At night quilts and mattresses are simply taken from cupboards and spread across the floor. When Kim visits her married sister in Inchon she sleeps in a bed in a flat with, she says, "washer, juicer, drier, blender, and all modern appliances." She rarely goes as Elder Sister is "lazy and orders the rest of us about." In Kim's house the whole family eats together, though in most village homes the men and women still take their food separately.

Behind the kitchen is a garden where the pickle jars and vats are kept, with the well and a few fruit trees and plants. A concrete wall surrounds the house but there is no gate; no one in the village locks his door at night and village crime is all but unknown.

The house smells of wood smoke, grain, and pickles; in rare moments of silence you can hear the tick of a Japanese-made grandfather clock. Paduga, the mongrel dog, who drowses most of the day at the gate, rouses every so often to bark furiously when one of the neighbors or an itinerant peddler comes by. It may be an aged man with an A-frame on his back selling seaweed or a youth in a flashy suit with flared pants roaring up on a Honda with his stock of cassettes.

Meals are simple but good. Always a steaming bowl of rice, sometimes mixed with a little barley, and a soup of vegetables or eggs. There will be three or four side dishes of vegetables, fish, seaweed, or eggrolls and that distinctively Korean dish, *kimch'i*. Made from tall Korean cabbage or long turnips, salted and fermented in big crocks over each winter, the garlic smell of *kimch'i* is so pervasive in Korea it is the first thing you notice as you disembark from your jet in Seoul, just as in Jakarta it is the odor of clove-spiced cigarettes. A taste for it is soon acquired.

Korea can be bitterly cold in winter (it was my first few days; I told Kim it should be called "the land of the morning cold" not "calm"). In summer it can be wet and steamy. But spring and fall, with crisp sunny weather, is glorious. At night in May you start to hear the frogs in the flooded paddy fields, a steady shimmering crackle that goes on and on, then abruptly stops in a dead silence until, disturbed by God knows what, the croaking starts up again. The sun is bright but not yet hot, skylarks sing and men plowing the rice fields can be heard calling "do-do-do!" to keep their oxen from lurching off the course. Often a newborn calf will trot alongside the cow, scrambling and tripping over the furrows. Kim's father, like many villagers in spring, engages in house repairs; a carpenter comes for a week to widen the terrace with teak planks from the Philippines and to shore up

the sagging roof with two new timbers.

With the fifth moon of the Chinese lunar calendar comes the annual transplanting of rice. Suddenly the fields are filled with people, knees deep in cold water and with backs bent to quickly thrust little clumps of seedlings into the soft mud. It is hard work but in South Korea the custom is for all the family members to return from schools or jobs in the cities to help a few days with the transplanting. So there is an atmosphere of reunion and festivity. The midmorning break for a meal beside the roadside becomes a picnic; Kim's mother has prepared a delicious pork stew; the wealth of food includes plenty of leathery dried squid. *Soju*, Korea's popular rice liquor, is passed around and all the men take a swig. In late afternoon even Kim's younger brother, in his schoolboy's black uniform, rolls his trousers high and joins the rest of the family, working until late dusk. All day boys trot from seedbed to field with towels tied around their heads and heavy loads of green seedlings on their backs. When we return home the last night, the transplanting done, the watery surface of the fields is spangled with tiny green shoots and the roads and paths are scattered with bits of wasted dropped plants, now past hope of reviving and bearing grain.

II. Fathers and Sons

"If you young people make more noise, another tragedy will come," Kim's father says. "It's not good for us."

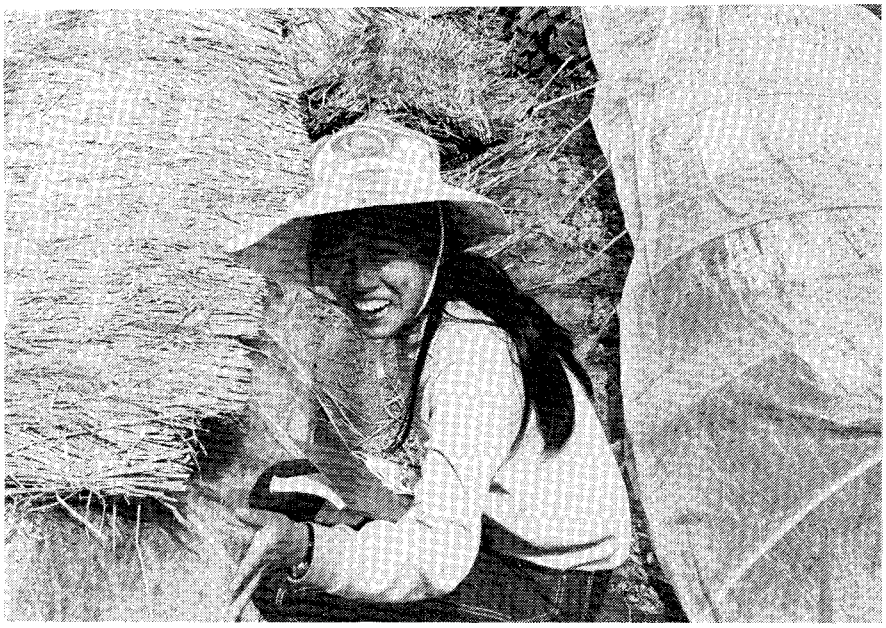
Several young men, about to return to their universities in Seoul, bow their heads in filial respect for elders. But for days in the fields, out of earshot of the older men, their talk has been filled with accounts of the Kwanju insurrections, stirring all-night rallies and torch-lit "grand marches for democracy," burning effigies and black-clad riot police with tear gas and Darth Vader-like masks. Kim is aware that many young girls like herself, in T-shirts and blue jeans, have taken part, something rarely seen in the usually all-male student demonstrations of the past.

Kim with power tiller (once house-bound women now do 45 percent of South Korea's field work).

The students argue that an end to military rule, martial law, and their demands for true democracy are justified. All "*yushin* remnants" left in power since President Park Chung Hee's assassination in October 1979 must go, they declare. They admit to the military menace of the north, that the old, ailing and possibly crazy North Korean leader, Comrade Kim Il Sung, is building up his armed forces of 710,000 men (compared to South Korea's 600,000) and has dug tank-sized tunnels under the DMZ just 28 miles from Seoul. "But my classmates and I," one youngster tells Kim's father, "have vowed to be the first to sacrifice ourselves if North Korea attacks."

Exasperated, the father explodes, "Have I not tied my empty belt and boldly given money to send my children to universities? I'm highly literate. I have a law degree from Japan. But I'm for *yushin* and I'm for the late President Park. That's important."

Such arguments—and I heard many in the Valley of the Swallows—suggest South Korea's current leadership crisis goes much deeper than politics, economics, or even a



Kim in vinyl greenhouse.

generational clash; at least partly at issue is the country's Confucian cultural tradition, which still decides, possibly more than anywhere else in East Asia, except perhaps Taiwan, how peasants out in 36,000 South Korean villages think and act.

Seoul is just a 90-minute bus ride away from Cho Dong Kok village; in 15-20 years it has become a great city of skyscrapers, subways, and 8 million people. A perhaps crucial fact about South Korea, aside from the extraordinary stability, until the Japanese occupation of 1910, of its long Confucian government, is that until very recent times its people were never urbanized. Even as late as 1960, farm households formed two-thirds of the Korean total. As South Korea has very quickly emerged as a modern industrial state—making the world's fastest economic growth in 1973-1978—this has dropped to one-third. A generation ago, 8 out of 10 South Koreans lived in villages; today less than 3 do. But average landholdings have barely risen, just from 0.8 hectare to 0.9 hectare in a quarter-century, suggesting most South Koreans keep some tie with their native villages. Older men, grandfathers who used to retire at 60 to stroll about in white pajamas and black horsehair hats (the hats have completely vanished from the scene), now do much of the farming.

Workers employed in farming—45 percent of them women—have fallen to less than 40 percent of the labor force. Since South Korea began its economic miracle, with an average annual economic growth rate of 10-12 percent during the 1960s and 1970s, young people have left the villages in droves. Today only 29 percent of the 38 million South Koreans are officially considered rural; agriculture represents only 23 percent of GNP; in 1964 it was 45 percent.

This means the Korean mind for people over 30 or 40 is still fundamentally rural, shaped by ethical-moral standards set down by Confucius in the sixth century B.C. and even older shamanistic tribal beliefs. In Cho Dong Kok, two sorceresses, *mudang*, were still paid to protect families from evil spirits, a practice that was old in Korea 3,000 years ago. (These sorceresses stand somewhat outside the village behavioral pattern. One day one of them whacked Elder Brother on the bottom. When he demanded to know why, she laughed and said, "Why are you 32 and still unmarried?") Confucian thought deeply influences all Korean behavior. Indeed, Cho Dong Kok means "Village of the Confucian School," though the last teacher died and it closed its doors some years ago. But the student rebellion and labor unrest from once docile workers suggests some conflict of ideas between the increasingly Westernized urban values of the fast-growing cities and the Confucian traditions of the fast-shrinking villages.

The Korean crisis superficially suggests an Iran analogy. The Shah fell after real income had been rising an annual rate of 15 percent for the Iranian people. This questioned the whole twentieth-century assumption we've all made: that a people who are growing richer will support their leader. In Confucianist East Asia this assumption still could be valid; a steady rise in GNP seems to be the best prop for semi-dictators. The difference is that in Iran the Shah and his men were the Westernizers; traditional culture, Iran's particularistic Islam, reacted against them. In South Korea it is the Westernizers themselves—students, Christians, a newly forming urban middle class—that are reacting against the traditional Confucianist notions of authoritarian family and state.

Even a Vietnam analogy comes to mind. Ngo Dinh Diem was not acceptably democratic in the Western sense. But he was an authentic Confucian-style ruler; after he was killed, the South Vietnamese, also deeply Confucianist, had no one to rally around (both Thieu and Ky, Westernized high school drop-outs, were beyond the pale in Confucian terms).

It would be hard to exaggerate the influence of Confucianist thought on the minds of the villagers in Cho Dong Kok, nor is there any reason to assume they were not representative. From the fundamental adage that "filial piety is the basis of all conduct" to notions of hierarchy, harmony, and communal obligations, Confucianism rules almost every aspect of daily village life. It is essentially a system of harmonious subordinations, the subordination of son to father, younger brother to elder brother, wife to husband, and subject to state. I was surprised to find the late President Park, who ruled for 18 years in a Confucian manner, greatly respected. Heavy-handed repression did, of course, exist under the Park regime and has continued under Park's heirs. But it is notable that most of the government's opponents and other dissidents have been urban, Christian, or in some other way Westernized educated people. Other than the students coming home from Seoul, I found none in the villages (and the students themselves were divided).

For good reason. South Korea's villagers practiced subsistence agriculture at the end of the war in 1953. I spent a year near Pusan and Taegu as a soldier and then there seemed no compelling reason why the villagers should not have stayed poor and been content with their age-old ways forever. It is true population was rising at a rate of 3 percent a year (now down to 1.5% as a two-child family norm and contraception have been accepted), but this has not kept other societies from stagnating.

Yet change was already taking root and it was peculiarly Confucian. Village family spending, as Kim's still is, was concentrated on education. By the late 1960s South Korea had the people equipped to build its industry and the boom followed.

Compare South Korea with Egypt. Both have huge armies and have long been on a war footing, similarly sized populations (38 million to 40 million) and exactly the same amount of arable land (5.7 million acres though only half of South Korea's is irrigated and almost all of Egypt's). The striking difference is that one is Confucian and the other Islamic.

For some years, Korean agricultural development lagged behind industry, though the 1949-1953 land reform had created reasonably equitable land ownership and incomes and a cooperative and credit system, financed by the U.S. Agency for International Development (today virtually out of business in Korea), established a way to get money into the hands of villagers. What was lacking was the

technology, which came in the 1970s with South Korea's successful adoption of new dwarf high-yield rice in its *Tongil* variety. Suddenly average yields rose 50 percent, incomes 30 percent and in 1977 South Korea broke the world's highest average-yield-per-hectare record with 4.9 tons of milled rice. Today its farm science established, the Office of Rural Development headquartered in Suwon, with more than 80 PhDs, many of them American educated, invites comparison with Japan's. This technical breakthrough was supported by a doubling of the subsidized rice price in the 1970s and rapid expansion of transportation, storage, and the urban market.

In 1970-1980 average village family incomes rose from about $800 to just under $3,000. Daily field wages of $8-$10—plus meals, *soju* liquor, and cigarettes—compare favorably with an unskilled city worker's wage, though urban family incomes, with 2-3 wage earners, of $4,000-$5,000 tend to be higher (South Korea's GNP per head is just under $1,500). Today everybody gets plenty to eat, even in what used to be the pre-harvest hungry season. In Cho Dong Kok village, they used to call it "barley pass," the highest of all Korea's mountains. This was the season of food scarcity when grain stocks dwindled, prices soared, and many villagers experienced real hunger. Today's young people can only imagine what it was like (the same with war; the vast majority of South Koreans are under 27 and never experienced it).

Now all village children go to primary school, 90 percent go on to high school and a few, if they pass the examinations, join the 280,000 in colleges and universities. Almost every village family has a TV set, plus a radio-cassette player. Every single village in the country is electrified, none is more than a day's bus or train journey from any other (in Cho Dong Kok the older people now occasionally charter buses for sightseeing trips), every villager is literate.

Almost every farmer has an ox or a cow but in the past 3 years 200,000 power tillers used to haul, plow, harrow, or harvest 4 times faster have spread to the villages (more than 5 apiece). Family-owned irrigation pumps have replaced traditional water wheels. Rice seedlings and vegetables are now grown in cold-resistant, Japanese-style vinyl greenhouses (indeed, the patches of white plastic everywhere give the countryside an oddly urban look in the springtime). This year the Office of Rural Development's extension service is giving one week's training (for both men and women) to anyone who will buy a newly introduced, Japanese-invented, power rice transplanter. This ingenious device is loaded with a pack of seedlings grown in special trays and shoots down a field like a power mower as a high-speed mechanical arm snatches a few seedlings at a time and imbeds them in straight rows at just the right depth. In a traditional Asian countryside, it resembles something out of *Star Wars.*

Credit also goes to South Korea's New Community Movement (*Saemaul Undong*) launched by Park in 1970. Villagers were exhorted with a Confucian-style slogan—"Self-help, cooperation, and diligence"—to build roads, wells, bridges and, most spectacularly, replace their traditional straw-thatched roofs with brightly-painted tile, metal or composition ones, something which has completely changed the appearance of the South Korean countryside.

Intended to redress a deepening imbalance with urban, industrial growth, Park proposed a $2 billion investment in South Korea's 1972-1976 Five Year Plan in rural development. The New Community Movement spread to irrigation, reforestation, the formation of credit unions, and expansion of health services. Most important, it took on a strong element of decentralized industrialization. Factory owners were encouraged to move their plants to the villages and thousands did in the 1970s, so that today villagers earn 20 percent of their livelihoods off the farm.

In the early days there was some coercion from overzealous local officials. Laggards might come back from the market to find their thatch gone and their home open to the sky. But today the New Community Movement is generally praised—even by the student dissidents—for helping to show that once villagers get capital, technology, and access to markets, a government drive to mobilize local officials and get them out in the villages to deliver the services can do wonders.

In South Korea, the villager owning 2.2 acres in a cooperative structure of credit, extension services, and conserving practices is now the dominant figure in agriculture. Ever-more productive methods—new seeds, more fertilizer, new techniques—now reach the farmer quickly. The political base was formed by the extension of land ownership to tenant farmers in the 1949-1953 land reform.

How much of a role has Confucian culture played? Jae-Chang Lee, the national director of the New Community Movement, told me in an interview he attributes a good deal of South Korea's farming success to Confucianism and "the cohesion it brings to our way and view of life."

"Korean ethics," he said, "are according to Confucian ideals of virtue."

Similarly, Dr. In Hwan Kim, who heads the Office of Rural Development's nationwide research and extension network, said the Confucian emphasis on applied learning has greatly eased the spread of new technology.

Interestingly, South Korea's shadowy strongman, Lieutenant

Villager of Cho Dong Kok.

General Chun Du Hwan, told *Time* magazine, shortly before he imposed an army crackdown on the country's students in May, "It is imperative for us to build a democracy that will contribute to our own national development—whether it is Western-style or otherwise."[1]

That "otherwise" almost certainly meant Confucianism. Since it became the official ideology of China two centuries before the birth of Christ, Confucianism has been essentially a philosophic justification of government by a benevolent bureaucracy under a virtuous ruler. As Koreans explain it, virtue ensures harmony between man and nature and insures obedience within a stratified society. As put by one of the Confucian classics, which are still sold widely in South Korea (though not, one finds, in Hong Kong or Taiwan):

Possessing virtue will give the ruler the people. Possessing the people will give him the territory. Possessing the territory will give him its wealth. Possessing the wealth, he will have the resources for expenditure. Virtue is the root, wealth is the result.[2]

We may not think like this but villagers in Cho Dong Kok do. When Koreans denounce the late President Park's "*Yushin* system" and "*Yushin* Constitution," they are referring to Neo-Confucianism, a reaction against "foreign" Buddhism (from India) which reached its zenith under China's twelfth-century Sung dynasty, when its greatest protagonist was Chu Hsi. The NeoConfucians reaffirmed the importance of Confucian virtues and codified the idea that the state and family were mirror images, the leader's benevolent rule reciprocated by the obedience of his subjects, in the same way as father ruled son. Park's "*yushin*" rule was modeled after this.

The students claim President Park merely used *yushin* ideology to mask dictatorial powers. So much attention has been paid by American newspapers and scholars to Park's political repression, I was quite surprised to find in Cho Dong Kok that he was deeply respected. His regime is credited with bringing about vastly improved living standards and in an acceptable Confucian fashion.

In a book published shortly before his death, Park spelled out the connection between the close-knit, authoritarian family and how well South Korea's economic development has gone:

Just as a home is a small collective body, so the state is a larger community.... One who does not maintain a wholesome family order cannot be expected to show strong devotion to his state.... A society that puts the national interest above the interests of the individual develops faster than one which does not.

Most villagers, at least those I met, would seem to agree. They have accepted a few such antitraditional values as contraception and women doing farm work. Young men and women can sit together (Confucius separated them after age 7). And a butcher's son can aspire to college. Yet the village *yangban*, like Kim's parents, still make great sacrifices to educate their children, while the former *sangmin* put more trust for future status and prosperity in agricultural investment. Old ways persist, above all the belief that the ultimate guarantee of harmony is the justness of the father, or the state.

The students argue that Confucius himself gave the people the right, indeed the duty, to rebel against a tyrant who had "lost the mandate of heaven." But the students' Westernized notion of democracy, with its freedom of individual choice, does not sit so well in a society where belief in the subordination of the individual is taken as natural and desirable.

The student uprising in South Korea of 1960 brought down President Syngman Rhee; it too was inspired by ideas of Western individualism and open politics. But how long did it last? Student riots against Dr. Rhee's autocratic rule began in February 1960; Rhee stepped down, elections were held, and on July 15, 1960, the two houses of the newly elected assembly voted to make Yun Po-sun President. But the economy tottered, the new government failed to win popular support, and the students continued their demonstrations. Park Chung Hee staged his military coup in May 1961. South Korea's experiment with Western-style democracy survived less than a year. Yet its Yi Dynasty, a classical authoritarian Confucian state, managed to stay in power from 1382 to 1910, a period of extraordinary stability. When it went it was only because Japanese troops occupied the country.

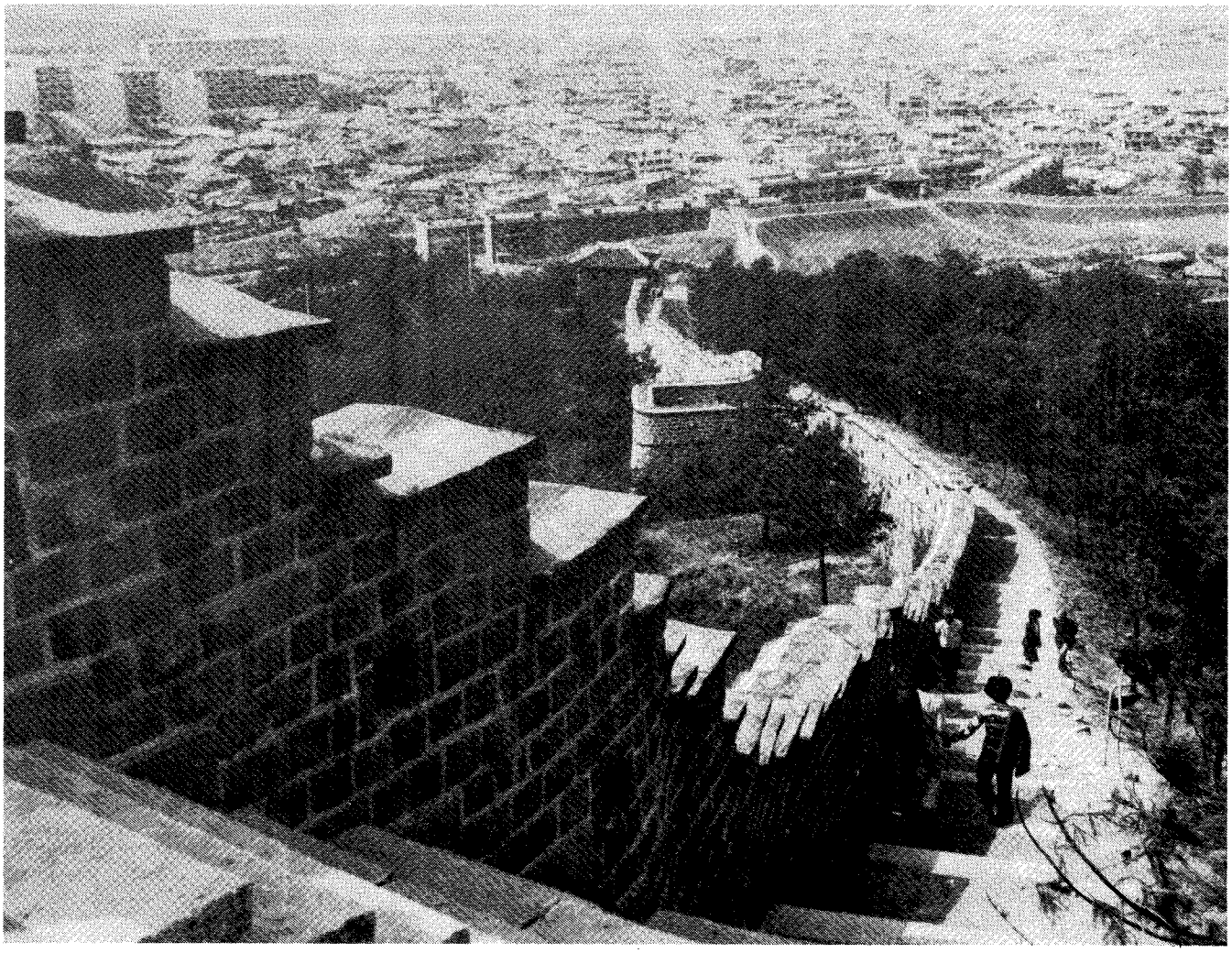
Confucian thought and the way it affects the turn of events in South Korea should matter a great deal to us. The United States has more than $6 billion invested in Korea and 38,000 American troops are still stationed there, with another 44,000 in Japan. But of greater long term significance is the way Confucianism affects how people think, not only in Korea, but in China, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and, in a somewhat different way, Vietnam too.

III. Virtue is the Root

In Tokyo last autumn, a Chinese vice-premier reportedly told his Japanese hosts: "Add your 100m to our 900m and we have a wonderful force that none can ignore or obstruct." A piece of wishful rhetoric? Perhaps. Calculated to revive Kaiser Bill's nightmare of the "yellow peril"? Possibly. A foretaste of the greatest threat to western supremacy since the industrial revolution? Definitely.

This paragraph begins a remarkable essay, "The post-Confucian challenge," which appeared in *The Economist* of London February 9, 1980. The author, Roderick MacFarquhar,[3] is an eminent British authority on Chinese and Asian affairs. MacFarquhar's thesis is that, since the onset of the industrial revolution 200 years ago, the West has dominated the world; today that dominance is threatened, not just by the Russians or the Arabs, but more fundamentally by the East Asian heirs to Confucianism, who have so far provided the only real economic, political, and military challenges to Euro-American culture.

I had met Dr. MacFarquhar at a dinner party in London last year and when I first read "The post-Confucian challenge" my only caveat was that it was too limited in scope. As I have written elsewhere, the Hindu and Malay civilizations, as they gain industrial and agriculture technology and culturally adjust to it, are going to challenge the West too. The West has merely had a 200-year technological headstart.



Yi Dynasty wall of Suwon, the nearest city, exemplifies South Korea's Confucian culture surrounded by the new industrial society.

It was only re-reading MacFarquhar's analysis after living some weeks in Cho Dong Kok village that I fully realized what a brilliant perception of truth MacFarquhar's probably seminal article was (one assumes a book will follow).

Anyone interested in development and particularly rural development, because Confucian culture is much stronger in villages, should read the essay itself. MacFarquhar describes Confucianism as "the ideology par excellence of state cohesion." He writes that the Confucian military challenge to the West came first (the Japanese in the 1905 war with Russia and World War II, the Chinese, Koreans, and Vietnamese since then). Politically the challenge has come from Maoist China, economically from Japan, followed by South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong.

What all these societies have in common, MacFarquhar writes, is "the shared heritage of centuries of inculcation with Confucianism" whose tenets "still provide an inner compass to most East Asians in a post-Confucian age." (In the villages of South Korea and, I'm told, Taiwan, one can drop that "post-" as they are still thoroughly Confucianist societies.)

What is Confucianism?

My first direct acquaintance of it came in South Vietnam when Tran Van Huong, a candidate in that country's American-sponsored presidential election of 1967, argued that a return to traditional Confucianist values was the only way left to save the country.

MacFarquhar defines Confucianism as:

. . . essentially a philosophic justification of government by benevolent bureaucracy under a virtuous ruler. Virtue ensured harmony between man and nature and ensured obedience within a stratified society.

Koreans like to make the claim that Confucianism is the longest-lasting and most influential system of human thought ever devised. The aphorisms of K'ung-fu-tzu (circa 551-449 B.C.) were set down by his disciples a generation before Socrates; they became the official ideology of China about two centuries before Christ under the Han dynasty. A Neo-Confucian renaissance followed in the eleventh and twelfth centuries in response to the influx of Buddhism from India with its renunciation of the affairs of the visible world. The Neo-Confucians reaffirmed the

importance of Confucian virtues but, more importantly, codified such precepts of Confucian philosophy as the relationship of family and state and the institutionalization of a benevolent bureaucracy.

Neo-Confucianism is still highly appropriate to settled, agrarian societies as it knits together society and polity in a manner calculated to promote stability and harmony. Ideally, state and family are mirror images, the emperor's benevolent rule reciprocated by the obedience of his ministers and subjects, in the same way as father rules son, husband wife, and elder brother younger brother. If the ruler is just he enjoys "the mandate of heaven;" the people have a right, even a duty, to rebel against a tyrant.

MacFarquhar treats Neo-Confucianism as a thing of the past (though it seems very much alive in the South Korean village) and is principally interested in post-Confucianism or societies which bear the hallmarks of industrialism-Confucianism, but which have been significantly altered by the accretion of new elements. He then describes the characteristics of such post-Confucian states:

(1) Self-confidence; Confucianism was essentially an agnostic ideology, concerned with the management of the visible world. Post-Confucians have few inhibitions about accepting the "materialism" of industrial advance.

(2) Applied learning is the key to success. This stress on education has meant almost universal literacy in the post-Confucian states, even in the villages.

(3) Social discipline; the Confucian concepts of loyalty, obedience, and filial piety are applied to the state as a mirror of the family.

(4) Egalitarianism; low inequality of income is marked in Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea, as well as in China.

(5) Moral exhortation to inspire the people into action is an established tradition.

(6) Obedience to a "benevolent bureaucracy" means wide acceptance of a society stratified by age as well as by ability. Subordination of the individual is deeply ingrained from childhood; the father is always obeyed.

What is most striking to me about Confucianism, at least as seen in a South Korean village, is its spirit of world-accommodation. It is closest to the world-affirmation of Protestant Christianity, with its strong work ethic, which gave the West its 200-year technological head start in the first place. In the teachings of Jesus and in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, the spirit is one of world-rejection which gives rise to spiritual *angst* as a people modernize.

Elsewhere I have written[4] that all the villages of my acquaintance have religions marked by a belief in magic and miraculous deliverance. In South Korea I found this was also true; sophisticated Confucianism shared the villagers' minds with beliefs in demons, magic, and exorcism. Cho Dong Kok's two *mudangs*, or sorceresses, are survivals of Northeast Asian shamanistic beliefs known from archeological finds to have existed in the Neolithic age in the Korean peninsula, an animism that goes back at least 4,000 or 5,000 years. The *mudangs* or shamans, as in black Africa (See Part I of this series, "The Magician") were and still are believed to have supernatural powers to contact the heavenly spirit which can protect the family and village from attacks of evil spirits. Modern Koreans appear to be ashamed of shamanism's stubborn persistence in the villages; in several studies of the country's religion I could not find any mention of it.

Both Buddhism and Christianity (there are over 5 million Protestants and more than one million Catholics in the population of 38 million) have had stormy histories in Korea, though both are so well established today as to be no longer thought of as minorities. The conflict has almost always been with Confucian philosophy. In a still-read classic essay, "Anti-Buddhism," Confucianist Chong To-jon wrote, "The Indian religion is one which destroys morality and harms the country."[5] Christianity has naturally always been identified with the West, including both its superior technology and political ideas, and the Western, non-Confucian ideal of freedom of individual choice. It is no accident that Christians were very active in Korea's independence movement from Japan and in recent years as opponents to the Park regime and its interim successor. Many of the leading Korean dissidents are well-to-do Christians—untypical of Koreans on both counts. Buddhism has enjoyed a revival among the young in recent years, though movements to create "a socially relevant Buddhism" seem a contradiction for a religion based on renunciation of the visible world.

The Korean world view remains a reflection of the Confucian vision of a carefully articulated hierarchical society. To them, as to the Chinese, their nation is still the center of the earth. It is as hard for them to adjust to a pluralistic world of equal cultures as it is for us. We tend to assume our Western ideals of an open, democratic society and the freedom of individual choice have a fundamental truth about them and ought to be universally accepted. In a philosophical sense, we ourselves are a bit like those old Chinese emperors who viewed all foreign countries as tributaries of the Middle Kingdom.

This is not how things look in the post-Confucian third of the world, or at least that tiny fragment of it that is a South Korean village. When General Chun says, "We have to develop a political system compatible with our own conditions. It is imperative for us to build a democracy that will contribute to our own national development—whether it is Western-style or otherwise," he is not talking merely as a soldier trying to justify a power grab. He is a Confucian trying to send us a signal about his own culture, a belief system very different from ours.

One day Kim's father told me, "We know America is very advanced in technology and materially rich. But very frankly, we feel your culture is spiritually shallow."

At the conclusion of his essay, MacFarquhar warned of the danger that trade war could become *Kulturkampf,* "with the post-Confucians asserting their right to take over primacy from the west." He wrote, "The winner would be hard to pick."

IV. The Enchanted Village

Harvard anthropologist Vincent S.R. Brandt, who lived in a Korean village in 1966, described during a visit in the late 1970s "startling change from conditions in the Korean countryside only a few years ago."[6] The first Asian village I ever saw was near Pusan in 1953; we had arrived from Japan by plane late at night. Two companies of our engineering battalion were moved after dark by truck to the small Korean airstrip our unit was to maintain. I shall never forget coming out of a tent that first morning and seeing, spread out beyond the barbed-wire fencing, a green valley of startling beauty and serenity. The villages were all thatched in those days and the people very poor; barefoot men went about bent over under the weight of huge loads on their A-frames. It was rice-planting season then too and the fields were filled with straw-hatted figures, moving steadily down each paddy, thrusting little green clumps of seedlings into the soft mud. A soldier's universe tends to be small; he is preoccupied, like a villager is, with what is going on immediately around him. For us, the rural countryside outside the air base was like an exotic, moving frieze, fascinating to watch from a distance but remote from our everyday lives. We saw the stone-strewn rice and barley fields, the thatched roofs, orchards and vineyards, heard the chorus of frogs and cicadas at night or the farmers singing and the sound of pipes and drums, and the shaded greens and blues of distant mountains, pinewoods, paddy and barley framed our drab world of fatigues, messkits and quonset huts.

Metaphor is a form of memory. When we liken one thing to another we are remembering. For years when I thought of the Korean War, it was, ironically, the calm of that Asian countryside I remembered.

Returning 27 years later was to find the valley had been absorbed in the rapidly industrializing port city of Pusan (population 2 million); smokestacks, factories, and bustling, commercial streets had obliterated all traces of the rural scene. I was disappointed to find the place so changed, but I doubt any Korean feels that way. And there are still thousands of mountain-locked valleys, like the Valley of the Swallows, where one can recover the calm of the past.

* * * * *

In the minds of the villagers, the Korean War has never ended. Downtown Seoul is just 25 miles south of the Demilitarized Zone as the missile flies, within a two and one-half minute bomber flight from North Korean air bases and within range of Russian-supplied rockets and artillery. In 1978 the third of North Korea's tank-sized tunnels was discovered under the DMZ bored into granite 240 feet below the ground; experts suspect at least a dozen more remain undetected. When I was in Seoul the government staged one of its monthly air-raid drills; within minutes the population had evacuated the huge skyscrapers that give Seoul an urban American look and moved into a network of pedestrian tunnels that lies below the city.

The old and ailing North Korean leader, generally held to be crazy, is said to be gradually handing over power to his son, Kim Chong Il. Starting in February 1980, there were large-scale military maneuvers in the north by their army, navy, and air force, amid charges from North Korean military men of "warlike provocations by the U.S. imperialists" and the South Korean regime. There have been ominous calls for "preparedness against war."

One morning in Cho Dong Kok, we discovered propaganda pamphlets from North Korea scattered around the fields; they had been floated south by balloons the previous night. One was in English and said, "Americans, you will die."

That day "Big Western One," the Peace Corpsman working in the leper colony, whose name turned out to be Brian, walked over from Dong Jim. By then, South Korea's post-Park unelected interim government had been contending with growing student opposition in the universities and labor unrest for over two months. North Korea's pamphlets, he said, "condemned" the "just struggle for democratization" by South Korea's workers and students. Even the villagers were growing apprehensive.

"Big Western One" said he had been at the Peace Corps headquarters in Seoul and the word was, if anything happened, "just to head south to the nearest base." The problem, as the young blond Texan described it, was that the nearest American military base was a squadron of jet fighters, itself sure to come under immediate attack. And how to get there? Presumably, all the buses and taxis would stop running. Speculation on what to do, if it came to that, dominated our conversation.

He had been at Dong Jim for some months, after earlier working in another leper colony near Seoul. His job as a health worker, Brian said, was to apply medicine daily to the lepers' ulcers. He said the five "active" cases in the village were not segregated and were still contagious.

Wasn't he afraid of getting leprosy himself? "I'd know what to look for. Numbness or anesthesia is the first symptom as are white or dark spots on the body, which are usually ignored. Then comes an inability to close the eyes as the facial nerve deteriorates. Or a clawing of the hands. If you catch it at the anesthesia stage you can usually arrest the disease. It's said it takes at least three years of continuous contact to get it but 9-month-old babies have been known to contract it from their mothers. One man in the village is one of fourteen children but he's the only leper."

Kim told him that she and I had seen a few horribly disfigured people. "Those are usually older persons for whom there was no money for drugs or no drugs available," Brian explained. I mentioned people had hurried into the poultry houses as we'd approached. Brian said, "Leprosy has a bad psychological effect on the victims. They're social outcastes. While strangers try to conceal their revulsion, the lepers can always sense it. There's a lot of prejudice against them."

He said poultry-raising was introduced when the lepers were first settled at Dong Jim as something people with crippled hands could do. "But in summer the chickens bring a lot of flies and disease; you get used to the smell." He said the government supplied most of the medicine; a doctor came every three months.

"Is it enough?" I asked.

Children of Cho Dong Kok.

"Not enough. But Koreans are fatalistic. In the old days if a clawed hand became useless, they'd chop it off."

"Big Western One," as Kim also called him, was evidently lonely and came often to see us. I thought, we are asking a lot of such young Americans, sending them to nurse lepers in a place where any moment they might have to "head south to the nearest base."

* * * * *

One day the Abbess of Bright Cloud Temple invited us to lunch. Buddha's birthday, the eighth day of the fifth moon, was approaching and the nuns were busy making the huge crimson, pink, and lavender paper lanterns which, like paper carp, belong to the Buddhist feast. The Abbess, shaven-headed and in the immaculate gray robes and stockings of the order, wanted us to see the new murals painted by a noted Seoul artist on the main temple's outer walls. There were a series of two panels running around three sides of the building, which told two separate stories.

The first began with an angel with a beatific smile and swirling garments, resting on a cloud. Then came Buddha's mother lying in advanced pregnancy and surrounded by smiling handmaidens in a pavillion on a lake bordered by gardens and forest. The mother dreamt of her son-to-be, Guatama, envisaged in a swirl of clouds astride a white elephant. The story went on, each scene depicted in a color panel, like an exotic Oriental comic strip. Buddha's premature birth, seen as a baby washed by the Nine Dragons; as an adult prince, borne in a richly adorned palaquin, as he gazes upon an elderly destitute and diseased dying man.

Then his flight from wife, child, and home. "All his life Buddha had stayed in the palace," the Abbess explained. "Now he goes east, west, south, and north and discovers poverty, death, and sickness." Kim exclaimed in surprise as Buddha was shown leaving his wife; she had not known he was married. "Now," the Abbess went on, "he goes to India to pray for the people," and we see him emaciated, sitting crosslegged under the famous tree at Bodh Gaya; oddly, it is snowing, as it does in winter in Korea but never on the Gangetic Plain.

"He prayed for nine years under the tree," the Abbess said, "seeking salvation." In her plain words she described Buddhism's philosophic formula for salvation through renunciation of worldly desires, thus avoiding rebirth in the endless cycle of reincarnations. Buddha is shown teaching that enlightened, compassionate souls, Bodhisattvas, would voluntarily delay their union with Nirvana in order to remain on earth teaching others. Three disciples, still self-absorbed, hold mirrors to their faces; the reflections are ugly and resemble, as pictures of demons in Chinese art so often do, red-faced Europeans. At last came the death scene; Buddha's disciples wail and weep, clenching their raised fists.

As the Abbess spoke, cherry blossoms, like pink snow, drifted down about us; the porch surrounding the temple was covered with them. The second story was a native Korean one, about a Buddhist monk who dreams of longing for his soul which has taken the form of an ox. At first the ox is half-brown, half-white ("Our minds are half-evil, half-good," the Abbess said.). But virtue triumphs and the dream ends with the monk happily riding his now pure white ox and playing a flute. The final panel is a landscape of jagged mountains, pine trees, rocks, mountain springs, and falling water; the monk, now an old man, arrives at his destination, a mountain monastery looking much like Bright Cloud Temple itself. The Abbess voiced the moral: if you follow the Eightfold Path you will reach your destination.

Buddhism, she told us, was illegal in Korea until the sixth century, when, perhaps reflecting Korean esteem for Chinese learning, it became the state religion, enjoying royal patronage from the Korean kings until the Mongol conquest of the thirteenth century, when the peninsula was ravaged. With the advent of the Yi Dynasty, it was replaced by Confucianism; to escape sporadic persecutions most Buddhist temples were removed to remote mountainous settings, where they remain today.

Before we left, Kim went into the temple to pray; her parents are Buddhist. For the only time in our acquaintance, this creature of blue jeans and T-shirts, caught between a new industrial society and ancient ways, wore a pleated skirt. The Abbess and I watched as she lit a candle at the altar. A young nun was chanting and beating a hollow, cylindrical drum at a side altar. Kim prayed, bowing, kneeling, prostrating herself to touch her forehead to the floor before Buddha's gently smiling bronze image; it was graceful and moving to see.

One would have liked to forget that Panmunjom and the DMZ, with the fixed, staring eyes of the North Korean guards and the chill Serbian wind blowing down from the north's austere landscape, were less than 80 miles away. Or that bloody student and worker riots and insurrection were erupting in the South Korean cities. In the Valley of the Swallows Confucian culture still stressed hierarchy and harmony, communal obligations, and the duties of the individual toward a paternalistic state. From president to policeman, just or unjust in our Western eyes—and to Westernized Koreans—authority descends; it does not rise. The Confucian ideal is rulers and ruled, fathers and sons, masters and subjects. And its tenets, inculcated over centuries, still provide the best inner compass to the Korean mind.

What the students then battling in the cities seemed to want was the fundamental democratic right to oppose whoever ran the country. What the villagers seemed to want was to adopt new farming techniques from Japan and the West but basically keep the order and security of their familiar Confucian behavior.

Bright Cloud Temple, with its pools and pavillions, gnarled pines, and winding pathways underneath the cherry trees, seemed, in its fragile tranquility, something apart. So did the young Texan treating the sores of lepers and wondering how he could "go south" if it ever came to that. The search for meaning takes many forms.

To its villagers, clinging to the old Confucian concepts of master and subject, ruler and ruled, the Valley of the Swallows seemed almost as much of a haven and refuge as it does to the lepers and nuns.

South Korea is a nation of such valleys. What is troubling about its political tumult is that the Confucianism preserved in the villages may have lost its hold in the new industrial order of the cities. Japan has evolved a successful post-Confucianist society; but it had a long head start in industrializing.

Most Asian political turbulence can be traced to population pressure, the commercialization of labor and property, and the collapse of traditional authority and customs. No culture is ever static. But usually there is time to make adjustment to change.

Eight of 10 South Koreans lived in villages like Cho Dong Kok just 25 years ago; today less than 3 do. When change comes this fast, and no society has industrialized and urbanized faster, a system can grow incoherent. Those caught up in it can find their old inherited solutions to problems—the old designs for living which men like Kim's father try to pass on to their children—no longer work. Political strife can then,

without conscious intent, bring a whole society to a state of collapse. One hopes this will not be South Korea's fate. But it, and not so much a Northern invasion, is what really worries Cho Dong Kok's villagers.

(May 1980)

NOTES

1. Page 14, General Chun Du Hwan, quoted from *Time*, Asian edition, May 26, 1980. It was Chun's first interview given foreign journalists.

2. Confucian classics most commonly read in village Korea are *Thousand Character Classic* (*Ch'onja-mun*), *Child's Guide to Knowledge* (*Tongmong Sonsup*), and the *Primer* (*Kyemongp'yon*). Almost all children read these. These are followed by *Precious Mirror of the Pure Heart* (*Myongsim Pogam*), Chinese moral aphorisms, and *Universal Mirror* (*T'ong'gam*), a 3-volume history. Hereafter a student reads the classics proper, working through the *Lesser Learning* (*Sohak*), *The Greater Learning* (*Taehak*), *Mencius* (*Maengja*), *The Doctrine of the Mean* (*Chungyong*), and finally to the *Analects of Confucius* (*Nono*). I found almost every villager over 40 had studied all these works. Only a few went on to the *Poetry Classic* (*Sigyong*), the *Book of Changes* (*Chuyok*) and the *Book of Documents* (*Sogyong*), which were considered very advanced. All the others, particularly the *Analects*, could be bought cheaply from traveling booksellers who came right to the village.

3. MacFarquhar, a frequent visitor to the Far East, visited Peking in May 1980, as part of former British Prime Minister James Callaghan's party. He is a former Labor M.P.

4. See Richard Critchfield, "The Peasant and the West, Part II: Prophets Come from Villages," *AUFS Reports*, No. 14, 1979.

5. Chong To-jon, "Anti-Buddhism," quoted from *A Handbook of Korea*, Ministry of Education and Culture, Republic of Korea, p. 197.

6. Vincent S.R. Brandt, quoted from *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, January 14, 1977.