

SANTANGELO, Paolo: *La vita e l'opera di Yu Suwŏn, pensatore coreano del XVIII secolo*. Istituto Universitario Orientale, Seminario di Studi Asiatici, Series Minor XV, Napoli 1981, VIII+237 pp., tables, 9 plates.

Dr. Santangelo, professor of Far Eastern history at the University of Naples, has greatly enriched our knowledge of Korea by this book, of which the only major deficiency the reviewer has detected so far is the fact that it is written in Italian. Thus, it is likely to be prevented from being as widely known outside of Italy as it deserves.

The book focuses on Nongam Yu Suwŏn (1694 or 1695–1755) and his *U sŏ* (Writings on Distortions), composed between 1729 and 1736. He was accused of having plotted rebellion against the monarch and condemned to death in 1755, his family at that time was reduced to the status of slaves. His ignominious death seems to be the reason why Nongam and his work quickly fell into oblivion and were kept there until the early 1970s, when Professor Han Yŏngguk rediscovered the *U sŏ* and wrote, in Korean, the first article on the man and his work. Since in almost none of the biographical and bibliographical standard reference works of Korea Nongam and his *U sŏ* are taken notice of, the two chapters in Dr. Santangelo's book which are devoted to Nongam's biography and his major work are great achievements in themselves.

The oblivion in which Nongam was kept has prevented us from becoming acquainted at an earlier date with what apparently has to be considered one of the most sagacious and boldest personalities of the Pragmatic School (Sirhakhp'a) of Korea. This reviewer has his problems with reading Italian, and he has almost certainly been barred from grasping as much of the book as a person better versed in Italian would have done. One thing he believes to have understood is that there is a closely knit web of basic convictions and recurrent thoughts behind the seemingly incoherent remarks that Dr. Santangelo elaborates on, and in part translates. This is at least what Dr. Santangelo's presentation makes us believe, and to have disclosed that web of thoughts is no mean achievement in view of the fact that in Nongam's writing, as in that of other authors of the old East Asian world, thoughts used to be jotted down in scattered and aphoristic remarks rather than be developed in longer and coherent essays. Chapters that this reviewer found particularly interesting are that on the development of cities and its socio-economic conditions (pp. 188–197), in which is presented Nongam's idea of making all settlements of Korea into citylike agglomerations, and the chapter on China as an ideal model (pp. 209–220). In the latter chapter, Dr. Santangelo describes Nongam's distinction, inherent in his work, between universal principles, which concern the social relations and public affairs and are to be observed by all peoples alike, and the local habits (*consuetudini locali*) of single nations. The source of the former is China, to be more precise, the glorified past of the Three Dynasties. This accounts for Nongam considering China the ideal model, which attitude makes him appear an adherent of the ideal of „serving the great“ (*sadae*). His actual references to things Chinese, however, are purely instrumental in the sense that he uses them to make his critique and suggestions more persuasive and to prepare the ground not for an imitation of China by the Koreans, but for the development of what is already there in Korea. This is the attitude towards China that seems to have generally prevailed among the proponents of the Pragmatic School. Even today, this attitude, self-contradictory as it may be, appears to be the prevalent one among many Koreans towards the allegedly superior outside world, although the country that once served as model has been replaced by others.

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