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RESOURCES FOR SCHOLARSHIP ON ASIA

Reading the Korean Cultural Landscape

BY JE-HUN RYU

SEOUL AND ELIZABETH, NEW JERSEY: HOLLYM, 2000

340 PAGES; 39 FIGURES; 49 PHOTOGRAPHS; MULTIPLE INDEXES

Je-Hun Ryu's *Reading the Korean Cultural Landscape* provides an invaluable compendium of short essays on the cultural geography of southern Korea. The range of essays can be seen in the book's five major sections: "Religious Landscapes" describes a variety of Buddhist, Confucian, Catholic, and Protestant imprints on the landscape of Korea; "Folk Landscapes" adds discussions of spirit halls, stones and pebble piles, and village rituals; "Linguistic Landscapes" addresses isoglosses, linguistic islands, and place names; "Rural Landscapes" provides discussion of elite (*yangban*) villages, folk housing, village forests, and the development of irrigation; and "Urban Landscapes" looks at both traditional and colonial imposition of order in several different cities.

Professor Ryu's book is extremely effective in demonstrating the importance of topography in Korea, and provides a wealth of background information (including useful photographs) that will help teachers introduce Korea as a coherent physical and social place. The analysis of irrigation in the Honam plain, for example, reiterates how extensive economic and political cooperation is required to reap the benefits of intensive agriculture. Discussion of Confucian pavilions reveals the virtues of sites along winding rivers that could meet the requirements of *feng shui*. Discussions of Buddhism and shamanism bring the reader up into the mountains where spirituality could be more fully expressed out of the reach of orthodox Confucians in the lower valleys and on the plains.

The book has many virtues, which inevitably escape this kind of abbreviated review, but its description of how religion is written into the landscape of Korea deserves particular note. Whether it is in the mountains or on the plains, in the countryside or the city, religion is everywhere. Consider simply the variety of what is described: there are big stones and small pebble piles, formal Confucian buildings and rock carvings in the mountains, large cathedrals and small storefront churches, public memorials and the family mound grave sites that dot the sides of the hills. There may be no better way for non-Koreans to grasp the physical reality of at least southern Korea than to see the way matters of the spirit are written into the Korean cultural landscape. This book will be a valuable reference for both university and high school teachers on such issues of religion, and also a useful aid in developing course materials on the geography of Korea—and the many implications of that geography for contemporary Korean society. ■

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