

HELGA PICHT

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by

Chung Young-soon

The Review of Korean Studies, in cooperation with *Jeongsin munhwa yeongu* (Korean Studies Quarterly), features interviews with eminent Korean studies scholars worldwide. In this tenth interview, we introduce Helga Picht, former Director of Korean Research Institute at Humboldt University, now retired. She is interested in modern and contemporary Korean history and literature, especially history of political thought in North Korea. The interview was conducted by Chung Young-soon, Assistant Professor of Korean History and Director of the Center for Information on Korean Culture at The Academy of Korean Studies. The Board of *The Review of Korean Studies* would like to express our deepest gratitude to Prof. Helga Picht for graciously agreeing to this interview and to Prof. Chung Young-soon for conducting the interview.

Life and Works of Helga Picht*

Chung Young-soon

Childhood during the War and Postwar Period

Q: Would you tell us something about your family background and your childhood?

A: I was born in Schwedt—a small town on the northern part of the River Oder—on 4th of January 1934. My father was the engine fitter Willi Schult, my mother the tobacco worker Hedwig Schult née Wenzel. Two sisters died in 1928 and 1938, immediately after birth, and therefore I was the only child. As everybody knows, Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933 and from the beginning concentrated all the resources of the country on the preparation of a big aggressive war. In the thirties this policy led to an economic boom, which guaranteed me and my generation a happy early childhood. We were not rich, but we didn't suffer from any want. Soon after Hitler unleashed World War II in 1939, I went to school in 1940. For the first time, we children experienced war by having only women or old men for teachers. Since my father was a soldier at the front, until 1945 I grew up without a father. At school I made a fair impression because of my good marks and therefore, teachers recommended my mother, when I was ten years old in 1944, to send me to secondary school. Although my parents felt deep objections because of the possible future costs, they agreed, and in August 1944 I attended the Hohenzollern-Gymnasium in Schwedt.

Q: Did this higher education have an influence on your future life?

A: We had regular lessons only until January 1945, it was a very short time,

* I would like to thank Mrs. Margot Irmer for her kind assistance reviewing the English text.

but of important influence for my future life. The “hunger for learning of the German working class”, as always pointed out by revolutionary social democrats since the end of the 19th century, was highly marked in my family. Therefore my parents and grandparents welcomed the chance for higher education and encouraged me with all their might. At the end of World War II, fascist propaganda reached its climax, and especially at the higher schools German nationalism and great power chauvinism were indoctrinated intensively. The once patriotic song “Germany, Germany above all” was understood only in that sense, that Germany and the Germans were superior to all other peoples and nations and were entitled to command Europe and the whole world. Indoctrinated with this ideology I began to learn my first foreign language—it was English—and enjoyed it beginning from the first lesson together with the cultural background that was taught. At the same time, all newspapers, the radio, and our teachers painted a picture of Russians and all Eastern nations that made us believe they all were inferior subhuman beings and wanted to kill us. Therefore I experienced the end of World War II in dreadful fear of the unstoppable advancing Red Army.

Q: Have you got any interesting experience of the collapse of Germany at the end of World War II?

A: Schwedt was located on the western shore of the Oder River and declared a bastion in January 1945; therefore it was commanded not to give it up at any cost. So all the inhabitants were evacuated by 20th April and my mother, my grandparents, and I fled 70 km in a northwestern direction. In the battles my native town was almost completely destroyed. The ignominious defeat of fascist Germany, of course, fundamentally shook German nationalistic arrogance. A key-experience for me was, that the entering Russian troops—although there had been criminal encroachments by soldiers brutalized in years of war—didn’t kill us, but met us children very kindly and gave us bread. This fundamental experience made me immune against exuberantly reviving German arrogance (in the West and East!) and suspicious about all kinds of propaganda, devalizing Russia and the Soviet Union as the incarnation of evil. Today, I know that this, on the other hand, made me in the following years trust in Soviet foreign policy to a less than justifiable degree.

Q: How do you remember the foundation of the East German state, the GDR?

A: When in East Germany, the Soviet occupation zone, the antifascist-democratic order was established, for me the best time of my life began. Because hundred thousands of children and I of the lower classes were given the chance to learn at public expense, which had never existed before. So, we welcomed and supported the foundation of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1949. The earlier foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany (West) and the fact that their industrial magnates had financed Hitler before, former government officials of Hitler's regime, fascist generals and judges, played a leading role had influenced me and my generation decisively. In contrast, in East Germany an overall antifascist education was realized. This propaganda was eventually, sometimes, one-sided, but had nothing to do with the "ordered antifascism" in the GDR maintained today by West Germans. Moreover, the new rulers of East Germany provably returned from fascist concentration Camps and from emigration from eastern or western countries.

Q: How did your educational career continue afterwards and how did you establish contacts with East Asia?

A: Receiving a public grant for higher education I attended the comprehensive school in Schwedt from 1948 and finished it in 1952 with matriculation. Best marks I received in German and foreign languages (Russian, English, Latin) and therefore I planned to choose my profession in this field. Besides, the above mentioned basic experience more and more deepened my interest in other countries and cultures. At school and in the organisation "Free German Youth" we dealt with both democratic cultural traditions in Germany and with Russian and other eastern cultures, as well. You know that in 1949 the people's revolution succeeded in China and this event in East Germany filled, above all, the young generation with enthusiasm. In 1951 the 3rd World Festival of Youth and Students took place in Berlin, for the first time in my life I met Chinese, and saw their performances and a big exhibition of Chinese art. I decided to apply to Humboldt University Berlin for Sinology and was enrolled.

Decision to Go to Korea

Q: Why and under whose influence did you decide on Korean studies?

A: When I went to university the first question the then prominent professor for Sinology, Eduard Erkes, asked us freshmen was: “Which second East-Asian language do you want to learn besides Chinese?” How could you answer this question, if you didn’t know anything? Languages offered were Japanese, Korean, and Mongolian. As for Mongolia, I had never heard of it. As for Japan, I knew only that it made a deal with Hitler’s Germany and therefore at that time it wasn’t a consideration for me. On the other hand, at the World Youth Festival in Berlin in 1951 we heard many things about the resistance of North Koreans against the aggression of American imperialism and felt warm solidarity with the ordinary North Korean people suffering under American carpet-bombing. The more so, as we young people remembered our own experience with bombing and shellfire not only in our heads but throughout our veins and limbs.

Under the influence of the linguist Heinrich F. Juncker introducing to me and other students the principles of Korean grammar in a stimulating and vivacious manner, I began to study Korean more intensively than my main subject, Sinology. When in 1954 Korean was acknowledged as a major subject in Germany for the first time, I changed to this new branch but didn’t give up learning Sinology, especially Chinese hieroglyphs.

Q: When and why did you visit North Korea for the first time?

A: In 1954 the GDR opened an embassy in Pyeongyang (relations were first established in 1949). Noticing that neither in Berlin nor in Pyeongyang could a person be found who was able to inform the Ambassador of the contents of North Korean newspapers, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs asked Humboldt-University to send a student to the embassy in Pyeongyang to practice Korean. Prof. Juncker recommended me and so I went to Pyeongyang for the first time. Thanks to Prof. Juncker I had come to understand the principles of Korean grammar and was able to find my way in the newspapers. But coming to Pyeongyang and meeting Koreans I realized that I knew next to nothing of everyday language. I had tried to learn everyday Korean only for some months together with one of the numerous Korean students attending high schools and universities in the GDR. The enrolment of approximately 2000 students and orphans was part of the great aid the GDR and other socialist countries gave to North Korea after the Korean War. Moreover, the GDR played a prominent part in the reconstruction of the town Hamheung and its industry, and hundreds of East German architects, constructors, and other specialists cooperated there with Koreans between

1954 and 1962.

Living in the embassy, I was taught Korean by a professor from Kim-Il-Sung University several hours a week. But my genuine teacher for Korean was old Mr. Mun who worked as an interpreter for Russian-Korean in the embassy. With infinite patience he corrected my more than stumbling attempts to translate simple German texts into Korean and explained all the structural and historic-cultural complications appearing in Korean texts. Working in the embassy my interest in the modern history and cultural history of Korea increased. I bought many ancient and new books at that time which were astonishingly available in bookshops and second-hand stores and decided to concentrate my further studies on modern Korean culture and literature. Doing this I felt that it was necessary to learn Japanese, too.

Q: Is it true that you in 1959 gained the first diploma in Korean studies in Germany?

A: When I returned to Berlin, a North Korean teacher, Dr. Ch'oe Chonghu, had begun to teach in the East Asian Institute. In special lessons he gave me, I could improve my Korean. Dr. Ch'oe, however, was more a linguist than a language teacher and therefore, he concentrated on grammar and high level language. At the same time, I began to study Japanese as a second subject. The teacher, Professor Herbert Zachert, had lived in Japan for fifteen years, spoke Japanese perfectly, and was a highly engaged and talented pedagogue. The structural similarity of Korean and Japanese helped me not only to learn written Japanese in a relatively short time, but also made me better understand peculiarities of everyday Korean I had yet not grasped.

In 1959 I passed the Diploma in the main subject of Korean studies and my second subject Japanology. Besides these, I had attended lectures in classical Chinese, Russian, and German literature and in national and international law.

Q: Can you characterize the specialties of initial studies in Korean as a major subject in Germany?

A: With pleasure. I want to add a few words about the specialties of this first course of Korean studies. In the beginning, students could not acquire any knowledge without using the results of Korean studies in the Soviet Union. Korean-Russian dictionaries and grammar books, descriptions of ancient and

modern history, translations of Korean literature into Russian, and monographs about culture and literature became basic materials of our studies. So, each GDR-Koreanist had to learn the Russian language to a certain degree, which is an advantage for me and others nowadays, too. On the other hand, this one-sided orientation stuck us to the Soviet point of view having negative effects especially on our opinions about the history and development after 1945. Convinced of the huge achievements and sacrifices the Soviet Union contributed to the defeat of German fascism—and I admire this still today—we were not able to realize that the great power of the Soviet Union under Stalin, and especially after World War II, had changed in many ways. The Soviet Union acted no longer in the spirit of humanistic peacekeeping of its early years, but more and more with the goal to strengthen itself as great power and to guarantee its spheres of influence. However, considering the current American world strategy I can't, even today, decide to agree with the aggressively spread opinion, that alone, North Korea and the Soviet Union caused the outbreak of the Korean war in 1950. Already in the seventies, my own limited dealings with North Korean, Chinese, and Japanese original materials and the reading of critical American monographs (for instance: I. F. Stone: *The Hidden History of the Korean War*, New York/London 1952) made me doubt in the one-sided Soviet descriptions. I recognized that the Korean War wasn't provoked by an unforeseeable North Korean attack on 25th of June 1950, but had its genuine roots in inner-Korean struggles of many years, and above all, in the beginning of the Cold War between the great powers after 1945. Reading Bruce Cummings' books about "The Origins of the Korean War" I feel confirmed in this more emotional opinion. Having translated Pak Kyongni's *Sijanggwa jeonjang* (*The Market and the Warfield*) and having read other North and South Korean novels, I am convinced, more than ever, that this disastrous war had brought Koreans North and South nothing but death, devastation, and a deepening of the national division. The winners of the war were only those who gained the highest profits from the production of weapons and war materials.

Q: Did this kind of studies influence your personal career?

A: The process of my learning was characterized by the necessity to verify all knowledge gained by transferring it into practice immediately. From 1956 I taught Korean language to second major students, and from December 1957 began to accompany North Korean delegations. This kind of practice frequently

confronted me with tasks I was not prepared for. But an old German proverb says, among the blind, the one-eyed is king, and so all persons involved kindly overlooked my weak points because nobody else could be entrusted with those translations. Nevertheless I am ashamed even today remembering my then inadequate efforts.

Immediately after finishing my diploma, I was enrolled in a so called research assistantship, a special way for encouraging women in the then GDR. The goal was to prepare me for further organization and development of Korean studies. My tutor, Heinrich F. Juncker, demanded that I self-reliantly do my research to prepare my doctoral thesis, "Song Yong and the proletarian literature in Korea," a topic chosen by myself. At the same time, I taught Korean language and gave a lecture on the history of modern Korean literature. I could master the language lessons to some extent by learning by doing, but the scientific tasks highly overcharged me. I had never taken a lesson on modern Korean literature and nobody could give me any advice. In addition materials about the subject available were only those from North Korea. In the first year of my research assistantship, I read all existing histories of literature and tried to understand what modern Korean literature was. I became more and more aware that I understood less the more I read. Nevertheless, my professor urged me to present my first reflections about the novels of young Song Yong at the 25th International Congress of Orientalists in 1960 in Moscow. There, I met Mikhail Pak and other Soviet Koreanists, our hitherto indirect teachers. I made some impression only because I spoke Korean, insofar as all the other non-Korean specialists did not speak Korean.

Q: Did you study in North Korea after your diploma? What special experiences did you have during your stay there?

A: Acknowledging my terrible lack of education I applied for one-year of study at Kim-II-Sung University in Pyongyang. The then ministry for higher education and the Korean side agreed, and in September 1960 I flew to North Korea for the second time.

Above, I spoke only about the consequences of the pure special subject of my first stay in Korea. But the most important thing for my future life was the decision, after first contacting and meeting the people and the vivacious culture of Korea, to concentrate on Korean studies definitively. The conviction to see in Korean studies not only the traditional philology but also regional studies in a

broader sense became firm. Nowadays such opinion seems somewhat to be a matter of fact, but at that time and for a long time afterwards, it was unusual and even arose suspicion. I remember a discussion I had with a linguist at the beginning of the nineties. The scholar reproached me for having an unscientific approach because the relevance of all my studies to the present times was not scientific and acted only as “public relations.”

Specialists for Asian and African Studies in the GDR pursued the development of their subjects in Soviet Union, of course, and in the USA, too. This was because they had established centers for regional studies, in which separation between philology and other academic subjects had been abolished already. Accordingly, a center for Asian Studies at Humboldt University was established in 1968, including a department of East Asian Studies. Thus a new quality of Korean studies and other country studies began. Looking back today, I think that the special groups (language and language teaching, literature, history, economy, and philosophy; in German: Fachgruppen) being founded from the 70s parallel to the regional departments were a new and very creative form of academic life. In these groups, Japanologists and Turkologists and specialists for all other Asian countries discussed recent problems of “mother-subjects” and their applications to regional studies.

Maybe it is difficult to understand today, but I decided on Korean in the 50s because I was enthusiastic about the North Koreans, about their incomparable desire for life and their motivation and sacrifices for a better life. In 1955 I came out of the ruins of Schwedt and Berlin and believed I knew what devastation by bombs meant. After a few days, I had to change my idea because in Pyeongyang there didn't even exist any remarkable ruins. When the plane approached the tiny military airport at the shore of Taedonggang, I was astonished by the numerous little lakes in the midst of the paddy fields. I was not astonished after it was explained that they were bomb-craters filled with water. In Pyeongyang itself, many people lived under the earth in the mountains and in foxholes, homeless children, hungry and freezing, were begging in all streets of the capital. I'll never forget that I, at 10 degrees below zero dressed in a thick fur coat, left our warm embassy-buildings and met children creeping out of foxholes with rubber shoes on bare feet wearing thin shirts over their naked little bellies. Visiting the provinces and talking to many officials and ordinary people, I grasped that the misery in the villages was even more terrible. The manufacturing plants constructed during Japanese rule and reconstructed or enlarged in the years after liberation between 1945 and 1950 no longer existed. Fascinating, in

contrast, was the rich edition of books, the wonderful performances on partly damaged stages, and the whole manifold cultural life. The histories and histories of literature and the ancient and modern literary compendiums I bought at that time take a honorable place in my personal library even today although they are printed on very bad paper and poor-looking. Only after many years did I understand that it was a privilege for a Koreanist to have met in their lifetime scholars such as Koreanists Hong Kimun and Kim Sugyong, the archaeologist To Yuho, or writers like novelist Li Kiyong and dramatist Song Yong, and to have seen several performances of the world-famous dancer Ch'oe Sunghui. The newly constructed governmental and cultural buildings and first simple residential buildings, the reconstructed streets in and around Pyeongyang together with the efforts to reconstruct industry and organize agriculture had begun to testify to the diligence and the spirit of sacrifice of the North Korean "*minjung*."

Q: Had North Korea changed in the five years after your first visit?

A: When I came to Pyeongyang for the second time five years later in 1960, the country had changed incredibly. On landing, I didn't see any "little lakes" but rather, broad areas of cultivated terrace fields announcing—in the midst of September—a rich rice-harvest. The airport wasn't a bumpy, uneven runway at the edge of the city-center, but a long runway built with concrete 30 km out of town at Sunan, the place where it is located now. The drive into the city upset me fundamentally because I now drove into a real town. Instead of the former few five- and six-story buildings looking like a few teeth over a destroyed lower jaw sticking out of ruins and heaps of earth, I moved across long rows of residential apartments and official and business-like buildings in two broad avenues. At the former damaged shore of the Taedonggang, a clean promenade invited walking. It was evident that the Koreans—I heard a Russian woman characterize them as "ocen' stremit' elnij narod" (very ambitious people)—in spite of their immense poverty, had mobilized all their energy in order to not simply consume the aid then coming from other socialist countries but to use it effectively to look forward to a bright future.

Q: Did you live among Koreans?

A: I came together with the historian Ingeborg Göthel and another young girl. It was planned that we should live with Korean students in a university dor-

mitory. Respecting our wishes we were lodged with one or two Korean girls in one room in an international student hostel where some 15 students from six other socialist countries already lived. I looked forward to this companionship because I hoped to have the opportunity to improve my knowledge of Korean language and culture. But this hope turned out to be, at least partially, in vain. We seldom saw our fellow-lodgers, because their daily plan was strongly regulated and they were urged on to an almost unachievable strain. At five o'clock in the morning they were woken up by the military command, *Gisaaang!* (Get up!), and expected to queue up at the newly constructed student restaurant. Young men sometimes did early morning exercises at that time. Lessons and seminars began at 7 a.m. and usually continued until 1pm. After a one-hour lunch, male and female students went to the building sites in the capital and performed very heavy labour for four or five hours, i.e., digging out earth, mixing mortar, and transporting stones. Doing this, students cleaned up the terribly damaged Moranbong (a hill in Pyeongyang) and constructed the above-mentioned promenade at the Taedonggang (a river in Pyeongyang). Every day, after dinner, political meetings were held, continuing at least until 9 or 10 p.m. Taking part in all these measures was the duty of each student. When our Korean friends came back to our common room they were at the end of their tether and were not able to help us even with some simple chatting. One of my friends had a beautiful voice. Therefore she became a member of a choir with 1500 young singers and one to three times a week went for rehearsals after the political meetings. The choir had numerous performances in 1960/61 and caused a frenzy of enthusiasm with both Korean and foreign audiences. The 21 year-old girl enjoyed going there and saw in it an honorable pleasure. Nevertheless, after a few months she fell ill with heavy rheumatism and was sent to the famous hot springs in Chuul. At that place I met her for the last time; she was walking on two crutches.

Q: Did this experience touch you strongly?

A: The tragic fate of this young girl affected me deeply. I saw in it evidence of the specific contradictions determining the life of many people in their struggle for social progress in the 20th century. For gaining an ideal society, not a few people had been prepared to risk their health and lives. In Korea and other socialist and liberated countries, politicians came to power having acted in their younger days in this way and now felt justified in demanding the same from the following generations. Not only in Korea, they were unable to understand that

with the establishment of new power, a new humanity had become a *conditio sine qua non* and nobody was justified to use the existing spirit of sacrifice up to such physical and psychological limits.

I apologize for the deviation but I want to explain why I am not ready to see in today's North Korea an "empire of evil," although I perhaps do see the present political system more critically than others. I disbelieve all the thick books of journalists and other voyagers pretending to have answers to all questions. I myself hesitate more and more to answer questions about the present situation in North Korea, as far as I haven't been able to experience the country since 1991 and have no possibilities to get new materials out of the country itself

Scholar and Interpreter

Q: In which way did your studies at Kim-Il-Sung University influence your further career?

A: In spite of the above-mentioned restrictions, my second stay in North Korea was the genuine start of my profession as a Koreanist. Together with Korean students, I took part in lessons on modern Korean literature given by the aged professor An Hamgoang. In addition, I had a lot of private consultations with him. Young professor Kim Yonghoang read Korean proverbs together with me and explained their linguistic peculiarities and historic and folkloristic background. The things learned at that time have helped me in translating Pak Kyongni's *Land* and other Korean novels until this day. Dramatist Song Yong—having played a prominent role in proletarian literature of the 20s—received me in his home and donated me precious materials. As a matter of fact, I couldn't gain the permission to look at original materials kept in several libraries. This fact strengthened my doubt whether the writers and scholars having moved to North Korea after liberation described the development of literature under Japanese rule objectively and completely. I asked professor An Hamgoang whether it was correct to see proletarian literature as the single representation of that time. As I know from German literature, the class-consciousness of an author doesn't give any evidence of his literary value. An Hamgoang wasn't ready to go into this discussion and I knew too little to insist. Afterwards, reading the papers of Peter H. Lee I became acquainted with the South Korean point of view. But Peter H. Lee, too, was of the opinion that in the twenties "proletari-

an literature made headway.” As a matter of fact, he didn’t mention a single name of a proletarian writer or artist. Only in discussions with South Korean scholars in the eighties did I understand that this kind of deliberate mutual ignorance was a traumatic result of the Korean War. In the ‘60s I felt more and more that it would be impossible to write a dissertation on the theme chosen by myself because I could only get North Korean books.

Q: Did you gain special experiences by interpreting?

A: I realized that I had to deal with learning the language above all. The GDR Embassy in Pyongyang, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other official institutions demanded more and more interpretation and translation. This business would accompany me until the end of the GDR and cost more brains and time than was good for furthering my career as a scholar. On the other hand, I had the opportunity to gain knowledge about the structure of Korean thinking and how to translate it and this helped me in teaching and research. When I interpreted talks between leaders of the GDR and the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK—the official name of North Korea), misunderstandings frequently arose. In the beginning I thought that it was caused by my lack of linguistic competence. But then I experienced that the misunderstandings also came up when Koreans having studied and lived in GDR for years and speaking German much better than I were also interpreting.

Q: Can you explain this more precisely?

A: Studying at the same time Korean history and culture more seriously, I began to realize that the misunderstandings were caused mainly by the considerably differing historical and regional backgrounds and also by the differing personal biography of the participants.

From 1968 to 1970 I was installed as a diplomatic attaché in the East German Embassy in Pyeongyang. As German-Korean cultural relations were underdeveloped and I was still the only East German person speaking Korean on an interpreter-level, I translated and interpreted often. While reading materials in Korean more than anyone else, I also wrote internal analyses on the ideology of Kim Il Sung and politics of the Korean Worker’s Party (KWP).

In this connection it must be considered that from the beginning of the sixties serious disagreements between the leaders of the Soviet Union and the People’s

Republic of China had developed. As you know, the leadership of the GDR followed instructions coming from Moscow while North Koreans tried to keep a more neutral position. Today, I think that this ideological struggle mainly led to the final success of Kim Il Sung's Juch'e ideology and his personal success in becoming the almighty leader of the KWP. Meanwhile, after the attempt to overcome the crimes of Stalin and the pernicious role of the personality cult of the Soviet leadership, Breshnev returned to the old methods of domestic power structure and strengthened the dictatorship against other socialist countries in terms of foreign policy.

Judging North Korea, both phenomena played a considerable role. All political scientists dealing with Korea and East Asia and other scholars including Koreanists in socialist countries condemned the growing overestimation and almost divination of the person Kim Il Sung inside and outside North Korea. The majority condemned Juch'e ideology in the same manner as the purely nationalistic distortion of Marxism-Leninism. My experience as an interpreter, however, taught me that national egoism determined relations between socialist countries not only in North Korea. Therefore and because of continuing interest in connecting theory and practice, after returning to Humboldt —University I changed the theme of my doctoral thesis. I began to deal with the theoretical foundations and cultural background of the politics of the KWP. I continued the same theme in my postdoctoral thesis under the title "Marxism-Leninism in Korea" in 1978. Researching original materials of the Communist International in German, Korean, English, and Russian I studied the history of the communist movement and of the national liberation movement and compared them with the historical propaganda spread in North Korea. At the same time, I was reading the *Nodong Sinmun* (central organ of the KWP) from 1955 to 1977 and the theoretical journal *Kulloja* (The worker) and all published speeches and articles of Kim Il Sung (editions from 1954 to 1976). My conclusion was that Juch'e ideology was a simplification and partially one-sided interpretation of Marxist principles, but not a hostile or even malicious perversion, as others have pointed out. Therefore I was sometimes accused as seeing North Korea through rose-colored spectacles or even of being a "Kim-Il-Sung-ist." Unfortunately, these papers were not allowed to be published because I openly criticized the personal cult and the dangerous lack of democracy in North Korea. Over the following ten years I wrote numerous articles and—sometimes unpublished—analyses about the development of the social sciences in North Korea, about the national consciousness in ex-colonial socialist countries, and about the roles of leaders in

underdeveloped countries. In a monograph “Asia—ways to Marx and Lenin” I tried, in 1984, to sum up the results. I still support the main ideas about the way to approach a scientific view of social developments I wrote about at that time. After the collapse of socialism in the Soviet Union and other former socialist countries, I have to correct my then unshaken trust in the concept of the ‘socialist society’ pursued in the 20th century. However, I want to stress that I am keeping my basic conviction—consolidated by the practical experience of capitalism I have been living under for fifteen years—that the now prevalent society that strives only for consumerism and profit must be replaced by a society oriented toward the genuine necessities of man if mankind wants to survive.

Q: How did Korean studies develop in East Germany after 1968?

A: At the end of the 1960s at Humboldt University, a Section for Asian Studies was constituted, under the third university reform in the GDR to transform traditional philologies into regional studies.

From 1971 the newly established Korean department trained students not only in Korean language and literature but in history and current policy, too. Until 1980 the department was headed by Dr. Reta Rentner, a specialist in Korean literature. I myself became head of the department afterwards. Between 1975 and 1990, 15 students finished with a diploma in Korean studies; six Ph.D. dissertations and three habilitations were also achieved.

In the field of Korean studies I began to deal with the specific Korean roots of Juch’e ideology and studied the history of Korean philosophy, presenting the results in my lectures and international conferences.

Second Period of Korean Studies

Q: What impact did the first contacts with South Korea have on the development of Korean studies in the GDR?

A: Since Japan had recognized the GDR diplomatically in 1973, new opportunities opened up for Korean studies. At the end of the ‘70s we started to receive South Korean scientific publications through Japan and Western Europe and could overcome the one-sided orientation on North Korea.

The first and most important thing for me was that in divided Korea—like in

divided Germany—there were not two different languages; mutual understanding with South Koreans was possible and I could use all the papers and books from there without difficulty. I realized that it had been a good idea to have taken lessons in Sinology and Japanology in the '50s, for I had available a certain understanding of Chinese hieroglyphs. Of course the acquaintance with the rich scholarly scene of South Korea demanded from us East German Koreanists that we learn a lot of new things to gain hitherto unknown views. On the other hand, I found my opinion confirmed that North Korean scholars, writers, and artists were the first to spread their own language, history, and philosophy under “minjung.” They used it for national education in schools and other cultural institutions. Similar surveys of history, literature, and philosophy appeared in South Korea only in the 70s, as far as I know. Here isn't the place to discuss the numerous differences, contradictions, and omissions on both sides, although this would be worth a detailed investigation. The main difference in my opinion was that the majority of North Korean statements about 20th century history became more and more distorted with the overestimation of Kim Il Sung's role.

Q: Why did you begin to study Korean philosophy?

A: Continuing my research about the history of Juch'e ideology, I dealt more intensively with the history of Korean philosophy; I began to compare North and South Korean surveys. I consider the comparative research of these materials very productive and creative now. But in international conferences of Koreanists I took part in from the beginning of the '60s, I experienced that most of non-Korean scholars neglected North Korean publications completely and used South Korean publications only to a restrained degree.

Maybe it is one of the peculiarities of Korean studies that specialists both East and West could not help in overcoming one-sidedness and more or less perverted their views, at least from the 70s onwards. If you didn't want to restrict yourself to secondary literature edited in Eastern or Western countries, it took a lot of time. In any case I know that this “second study of Koreanistics”—as I would like to characterize it—took me almost ten years of my life.

In 1986 I was appointed a full professor to the first chair for Korean studies established in Germany (East and West).

Q: How did you experience German unification as a Koreanist?

A: When the GDR collapsed and the unification of Germany took place by unequal absorption like at the time of Bismarck “from above,” I hoped that further development of Korean studies would be possible. In connection with restructuring the university system according to the West German one, I initiated the foundation of an Institute for Korean studies at Humboldt University. I think it was justified because only at Humboldt University were there established two full professors (Korean Studies: Helga Picht, History of East Asia: Ingeborg Göthel), one lecturer (Korean literature: Reta Rentner), and one linguist, who had published a textbook for learning basic Korean (Wilfried Herrmann), supported by junior staff in charge of language, literature, history and (South Korean) economy. However, this attempt to establish a modern regional center for Korean studies in Berlin unfortunately failed.

None of the young Ph.D. holders in Korean studies could continue their career after unification. Reta Rentner and some other colleagues continued lecturing until retiring and guided eight students to their Diploma until 2000. East and West-Berlin Koreanists undertook joint attempts to establish a scientific center for Korean studies in Berlin at the beginning of the nineties. The concept was acknowledged and even applauded by the then structural commission but never attracted the attention of politicians or governmental institutions. At the beginning of the new century there was no longer Korean studies in the German capital. The official reason given for the abolition of this traditional subject was lack of finance. However, graduates of East German Korean studies did well in North and South Korean, American, and Austrian universities, in the German-Korean Chamber for Industry and Trade, at “Samsung” in Berlin, and as interpreters or translators in other economic institutions; a fact which makes their former teachers, including myself, very happy. The German decision to give up the long tradition of Korean studies, in my view, is another discrimination of the achievements East Germans reached in their lifetimes. I am especially sad that our attempts to broaden Korean studies in Germany were cut. Moreover, it is a great pity that the fund of North Korean materials and many documents and other materials collected, officially and by private persons as well, cannot be used. I myself was unbearably defamed and prejudiced for “representing the interests of the GDR.” Therefore I decided to retire from university in 1992. It was possible as I was 58 years old and could use the beneficial opportunity of early retirement. Until 1995/96 I was teaching as guest professor (History of Korean philosophy, and the current problems of both Koreas) and guided Mrs. Chung Young-soon to her Ph.D. (North Korean Juch’e ideology) and two stu-

dents to their diplomas.

The tolerant interest and unprejudiced attitude of South Korean scholars made my difficult decision to retire easier. Thanks to them and to the International Society for Korean Studies (Osaka), I could take part in all international conferences of Koreanists during the 90s. I continued my studies into the history of Korean philosophy, published papers on its problems, and produced an article comparing Juch'e and Juch'esong in North and South Korea. Doing this, I could take part in numerous conferences in South Korea and maintain contact with prominent South Korean scholars.

Third Period of Korean Studies

Q: Why have you been concentrating on editing and translation of modern Korean literature since 1992?

A: Generously sponsored by the Korean Culture and Arts Foundation (Today: Korean Literature Translation Institute), I began to concentrate on my former hobby, the editing and translation of modern Korean literature. Having edited three little books and having studied modern South Korean literature more thoroughly, I decided in 1998 to spend the rest of my life as a scholar editing and translating the novel *Land* by Pak Kyongni, which is often characterized as the most important Korean novel of the 20th century.

Interested people ask me again and again why I decided on this project. The first projects I completed were chosen more or less by chance and my personal fancy. From the second half of the 90s I read the prominent papers introducing modern Korean literature, above all the books of Kim Yoonsik, systematically to find a novel worthy not only as a bestseller but estimated as the representative opus by literary critics. Doing this, of course, I came across to Pak Kyongni's *Land*. I began to read the novel and got the impression almost immediately that this opus came nearest to my preoccupation as a Koreanist. This is because my decision to deal with Korea and East Asia resulted from my interest in foreign cultures and the desire to bring them nearer to Germany.

Dealing with *Land* and other novels of Pak Kyongni, I remembered the beginning of my studies. We began to learn Korean with the highly deserved but antiquated textbooks of the priest André Eckart. Prof. Juncker decided to complement it with more up-to-date materials. Koreans living in the Soviet Union

had created some textbooks for teaching their mother language to their children and grandchildren. This led to the strange situation in which we didn't learn Korean realities in Korean language lectures, but read descriptions of the Moscow Kremlin or Korean translations of Russian tales. Please, don't misunderstand me. I am still admiring the courage and strength of Heinrich Juncker, being at that time more than 60 years old, for he was able to fill us young people with enthusiasm for the Korean language and culture having nothing more than these simple materials. I want to underline once more that I was enabled to master this tricky (excuse this term) language in private studies after decades only because professor Juncker taught me the linguistic fundamentals. To become acquainted with Korean culture was still more difficult. As mentioned above, we used the results of rich and highly developed Soviet Korean studies for this. The lack of books written by Koreans themselves and the lack of translated Korean literature in an accessible language to us were decisive. Reading and translating Pak Kyongni's *Land* today I remember all these facts. I dream to accomplish the translation in my lifetime. Perhaps in 2050 a teacher will advise a young person interested in Korea: Read the German translation of *Land* and you will understand what distinguishes this country from all others. That's my opinion about this opus. I felt that already when I dealt with the first part, which is being edited in Secolo publishing house Osnabrück. This feeling deepened with the second part that I am translating now, for in this part the story shifts to Northeast China. The fate of Korean protagonists interweaves with that of Chinese and Japanese, and the fate of the Korean nation shows to be inseparably tied to the development of the whole of East Asia.

When I studied Korean philosophy, especially the dialectical interaction of acquisition and originality in its genesis, I came to the conclusion that creative eclecticism was its specialty. Reading Pak Kyongni, I discovered that Korean thinking in the 20th century is characterized by a conglomerate of Confucian, Buddhist, Taoist, Shamanistic, and even Christian elements. So dealing with the novel means to continue my studies of Korean philosophy and the everyday life of the Korean people. The characters of the novel and their circumstances of life are colourful and intricate to the same degree and so I am learning new things about past and present life of Koreans every day, including having a better understanding of cultural-historic relations.

Doing this, I have gone through my third study period of Korean studies over the past ten years. The discussions lasting for hours with the co-interpreter Han Chunghwa, born and raised in Korea but living in Germany together with her

family for more than 20 years, does help me tremendously. Without it, there would have been many misunderstandings.

Q: Do you think the translation of literature is a scientific work?

A: Here I would like to add some words about translating literature. Often "pure" scholars remark that someone "only" translates literature. Earlier, I felt hurt by such remarks but today I can live with them because hardly anyone of those using this "only" would be able to do it. Moreover, hearing such words, I remember my late colleague, the Japanologist Jürgen Berndt. At the beginning of the 60s he had started to translate modern Japanese literature into German in the GDR. He underlined already at that time that he doubted the ability of foreign scholars to understand cultural-historic processes in Japan to the same level as Japanese can do for themselves. Therefore, he felt himself above all a mediator of science and arts of the Japanese. I believe the long lasting impact of Jürgen Berndt's achievements show clearly that he was right. This experience encouraged my decision to translate prominent literature for the rest of my life, as well.

Proud and Ashamed

Q: Do you want to say some words about your basic experience, finally?

A: Glancing back on my life I am proud and ashamed at the same time. I am proud to have mastered my subject to the level to be able to accept the challenge—the translation of the opus of the century, *Land*. At the same time, I feel ashamed and afraid that I cannot do this job to the quality required.

I am proud that I could help some young people—Koreanists and Japanologists—on their way in their profession, as for instance, with their PhD. I am very glad that some of them keep sympathy and friendship with me and ask my advice even today.

In view of the ignominious collapse of the GDR, the sense of shame about my own failure is very painful. I am ashamed; because I didn't grasp the scientific character of Marxism to the full and therefore I could be manipulated to one-sided and biased opinion on the Cold War and the struggle between the great powers; because I didn't use opportunities to contradict when necessary in the GDR and kept my mouth in pure indolence; because I influenced young

people with this uncritical attitude.

I want to underline here, too, that in the GDR since the beginning of the 60s, nobody was threatened with life and limb but “only” in terms of social status and career. Therefore for me and other people sharing my view, the identification of the lack of democracy in the GDR with the fascist German dictatorship still practiced by certain West German politicians and journalists is absolutely unbearable. I am still proud for having taken part in the experiment “socialism on German soil” out of honest conviction and with all my might.

Finally I want to thank you for the invitation to this interview, especially Mrs. Dr. Chong Yongsoon for her sympathetic way of putting questions. For me, this interview is a great honor and an appreciation I didn’t expect at my age. I want to emphasize that I gave my personal opinions answering the questions and tried not to exclude anybody. If I hurt someone’s feelings I do apologize—such was not my intention.

Some decades ago I read the following sentence in the *Sonntagszeitung für das deutsche Haus* (volume 1906): “The more someone is able to judge, the more careful they are to condemn.” In my career as a Koreanist I tried to follow this advice all the time.

Chronology

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| 1934 | Born on January 4 in Schwedt/Oder to a worker’s family. |
| 1952 | University entrance level at the secondary school in Schwedt. |
| 1959 | Diploma in Koreanistics and Japanology at Humboldt University in Berlin. |
| 1955-1956 | Internship at the East German embassy in Pyeongyang. |
| 1960-1961 | Research studies at Kim-Il-Sung University in Pyeongyang. |
| 1962 on | Second profession as Korean interpreter. |
| 1964-1978 | Assistant professor for Korean studies at Humboldt University, Berlin. |
| 1968-1970 | Attaché for culture and science at East German embassy in Pyeongyang. |
| 1974 | Received a Ph.D. with dissertation on “Problems of History of Worker’s Party of Korea.” |
| 1978 | Second doctorate with dissertation on “Marxism-Leninism in Korea.” |

- 1978 Lecturer of Korean studies at Humboldt University, Berlin.
- 1980-1990 Head of Korean department in the Section for Asian studies at Humboldt University.
- 1986 Full professor of Korean studies.
- 1990-1992 Director of Institute for Korean Studies at Humboldt University.
- 1992 Retired from university in March.
- 1990 Chairperson of German-Korean Cultural Society.
- 1992-1995 Guest professor at Humboldt University. (History of Korean philosophy, Actual problems of Korea).
- 1990-2000 Vice President of International Society for Korean Studies (Osaka).
- 1993-present Translation of modern Korean literature.

Publications

- 1984 *Asien—Wege zu Marx and Lenin*. Berlin: Dietz-Verlag.
- 1984 *Pak Wanso: Das Familienregister*. Translation and edition of *Geudae ajikdo kkeumkkugo inneunga* (Are You Still Dreaming, Dear?) into German. Berlin: Verlag Volk und Welt.
- 1991 “Korea munhage daehan gochal” (An Examination of Korean Literature). *Yesul segye* (The World of Art) 10.
- 1991 “Byeonhwahaneun cheolhakjeok gaenyeomeuroseoui juchewa jucheseonge daehayeo” (On “Juche” and “Jucheseong” as a Transitioning Philosophical Concept). Presented in the International Academic Seminar on “Bukhan chejeui byeonhwa: hyeonhwangwa jeonmang” (Transformation of North Korean System: Current Status and Prospects) in Pyeongyang.
- 1994 “Korea cheolhaksa yeongu jemunjee gwanhan myeot gochal” (Considerations on the Study of Korean Philosophy). *Gukje goryeo hakhoe* (International Society for Korean Studies) 1.
- 1995 *Jun Tschongmo*. Translation and edition of *Emi ireumeun josenbbiyetoda* (My Mother’s Name Was “Josenbbi”). Schwedt: Kiro-Verlag.
- 1998 *Moderne koreanische Erzählungen I*. Bielefeld: Pendragon Verlag.
- 2000 *Pak Kyongni: Land I. Translation of Toji 1 & 2* published by

- 2001 Nanam Chulpansa in Seoul, Korea. Osnabrueck: Secolo Verlag.
“The Trauma of Korean War, Reflected in North and South Korean Literature (Comparison of Ri Ki-Jong’s *Soil 2* and Pak Kyongni’s *Sijanggwa jeonjang* (The Market and the Warfield)).” Proceedings of the 20th Conference of the AKSE in London.
- 2002 “Koreanische Philosophie—Uebernommenes und Eigenes.” Presented at the First Korea-Forum in Osnabrueck.
- 2002 “Nammyong Chosik” (1501 bis 1572). Presented at ein Konferenzbericht asien afrika lateinamerika in Berlin in August.
- 2002 “Bakgyeongniwa segye munhak” (Pak Kyongni and World Literature). *JeIcha segye hangukhak, joseonhak/koriahak daehoe nonmunjib* (Collection of the First World Conference on Korean Studies and Joseon Studies) in Seoul.
- 2002 *Pak Kyongni: Land II*. Translation of *Toji(Land) 3 & 4* published by Nanam Chulpansa in Seoul, Korea. Osnabrueck: Secolo Verlag.
- 2002 *Pak Kyongni: Markt und Krieg*. Translation of *Sijanggwa jeonjang* (The Market and the Warfield) 1 & 2 (published in 1993 by Nanam Chulpansa in Seoul, Korea). Osnabrueck: Secolo Verlag.