

## Ch'oe Namsŏn at the Height of Japanese Imperialism<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Many have thought that Ch'oe Namsŏn (1890-1957), a prominent Korean intellectual in the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945), betrayed his nation because he worked for the Japanese-led Korean History Compilation Committee from 1928 and even urged Korean students to join the Japanese army in 1943. A careful study of his writings reveals that he continued his attempt to elevate Korea's position, based on his Social Darwinist understanding of the imperialist world. In the 1920s, he focused on clarifying indigenous religious traditions in Korea and surrounding nations in order to portray Korea as the center of the northeast Asian cultural sphere. Later, he supported Japanese aggression on north and northeast China with the hope that Koreans may gain access to that vast region.

**Keywords :** Ch'oe Namsŏn, history, Korea, imperialism, Social Darwinism

### Introduction

In December 2004, the National Assembly of Republic of Korea passed legislation to form a committee to reinvestigate pro-Japanese, anti-nationalist activities under the Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945)<sup>2</sup>. During the presidency of Yi Sŭngman over a half century ago, a similar committee investigated and arrested former pro-Japanese individuals although political circumstances of the time soon forced its disbandment. Ch'oe Namsŏn (1890-1957), a prominent intellectual at the time, was arrested by this committee as a pro-Japanese, anti-nationalist in February 1949<sup>3</sup>.

Ch'oe became known for the publication of patriotic magazines with his prose and poetry for Korea's enlightenment movement before 1910, and he drew much respect as the writer of the declaration of independence for the March First Independence Movement in 1919. After publishing important his-

<sup>1</sup> An Earlier version of this article was delivered at the Second World Congress of Korean Studies, held at Peking University, People's Republic of China, February 3, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> *Han'guk ilbo*, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Kil, 1984: 75-76.

torical articles on early Korea, however, he began working with the Japanese in 1928 as a member of the Korean History Compilation Committee commissioned by the Government-General. He went on to join the faculty of Jian'guo University in the Japanese puppet state Manchukuo, and recruited Korean youth for the Japanese army during World War II.

The purpose of this paper is to probe the reasons for Ch'oe's collaboration with the Japanese through paying special attention to his nationalism and historical views expressed in his writings. Contrary to the popular belief that Ch'oe abruptly changed his allegiance, his nationalism from the beginning had certain similarities with Japanese expansionism, and his accommodation with the Japanese developed gradually in response to the expansion of the Japanese empire. After examining his views and theories expressed in his historical studies, we shall chronologically follow his collaborative activities and writings in three phases: from 1928 to 1931, from 1931 to 1941, and from 1941 to 1945.

### Earlier Years

Ch'oe was born in Seoul to a family of the middle people (*chungin*), a part of the class placed between the *yangban* aristocrats and commoners. After receiving a classical Chinese education in Seoul, he studied in Japan for two brief periods: in 1904 as a student supported by the Korean government and on his own in 1906 at Waseda University. Returning to Seoul, he threw himself into the patriotic enlightenment movement of the day and launched the publication of *Sōnyon* (Youth), a path-breaking monthly magazine that introduced Korean youth to Western knowledge, utilizing then-revolutionary vernacular prose and poetry<sup>4</sup>.

In the age of imperialism when Korea's autonomy was threatened by Japanese encroachment, the Social Darwinist view of the world, expressed particularly by the Chinese intellectual Liang Qichao (1873-1928), left a strong impression on young Ch'oe's mind. Liang's version of Social Darwinism was popularized among Korean intellectuals particularly through Sin Ch'aeho (1880-1936), a prominent nationalist, who wrote numerous historical and political articles for Korean newspapers. Liang divided peoples and nations into hierarchical categories according to their success measured primarily by territorial expansions and cultural achievements in world history. He placed the white people, particularly the Anglo-Saxons and the Germans, at the top of the hierarchy while he kept those subjugated by them on the bottom. In this hierarchy, the

<sup>4</sup> For Ch'oe's biographical information, see Cho, 1964 and Yi Yonghwa, 2002.

yellow people, who had contributed to the world cultures in the past, were situated in the middle as they were losing in territorial competitions in the contemporary world<sup>5</sup>.

As early as in 1906, Ch'oe expressed his dream of the Korean people rising to the top of the world hierarchy.

How long will it take us to accomplish the goal of flying our sacred national flag above the world and having peoples of the five continents keel down before it? Exert yourselves, our youth!<sup>6</sup>

The world he envisioned was not a world where all peoples and nations coexisted and enjoyed equal rights, but a world where the Korean people dominated and influenced the other nations, replacing the Western powers. This dream of his holds a key to understanding his writings and actions throughout his life.

Despite the patriotic enlightenment movement, the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910 reduced Korea into a colony at the bottom of the world ranks. The Japanese colonial administration sought to assimilate the Korean people into the Japanese empire as a second-class, subordinate people, by denying Korean cultural traditions and implanting Japanese language and cultural values. Ch'oe did not give in to, or vehemently oppose the Japanese rule. Instead, he chose to resist the Japanese by cultural means, elucidating and emphasizing Korea's unique and indigenous cultural traditions, so the Koreans could maintain and strengthen their national identity. He published numerous pieces of *sijo*, a traditional form of Korean poetry, founded *Chosŏn Kwangmunhoe* (Association for Korea's glorious literature) to print and distribute scattered classical writings, and also began writing historical articles, particularly on ancient Korea.

Although Ch'oe is known for drafting the declaration of independence and a number of petitions for the March First Independence Movement in 1919, his participation in the movement was rather passive. He agreed to draft the documents only after being urged by his old friend Ch'oe In, and did not allow his name to be listed among the signers of the declaration of independence on the grounds that he wished to contribute to the society as a scholar. The Korean people, however, looked up to him as a great leader of the independence movement when they identified him as the writer of the declaration. They gave him a hero's welcome when he was released from prison two and half

<sup>5</sup> Yi Kwangrin, 1978: 40-45; Robinson 1984, 122-130.

<sup>6</sup> Ch'oe, 1906, 10:257.

years later<sup>7</sup>. The people's high expectations proved to be a heavy burden on him when he began to take the path of accommodation with the Japanese. They felt disillusioned and betrayed to see him not living up to their expectations although he in fact never intended to be a political activist.

Ch'oe participated in the cultural nationalist movement of the 1920s by publishing a weekly magazine, the *Tongmyŏng* (Eastern light), and a daily newspaper, the *Sidae ilbo* (Daily news), between 1922 and 1924<sup>8</sup>. Financial difficulties, however, soon forced him to wash his hands of the publication business. He subsequently took up historical studies as his life work and began publishing numerous articles including "Tan'gun ron" (Treatise on Tan'gun) in 1926 and "Purham munhwa ron" (Treatise on Purham culture) originally published in Japanese in 1927. In "Tan'gun ron," he refuted Japanese scholars' view that Tan'gun, the first ruler of the ancient Korean state according to the *Samguk yusa* (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms) compiled in the thirteenth century, was a later fabrication, and argued that he represented shaman-rulers of ancient Korea that worshipped heaven and the sun.<sup>9</sup> Further, he asserted in "Purham munhwa ron" that this indigenous heaven-worship tradition, which he called the way of p̄ark (sun, heaven, and light), was not limited to Korea, but had once been spread in the entire northeastern part of Eurasia and helped constitute a cultural sphere (Purham culture) in this vast region in Asia. He went on to argue that the Purham cultural sphere rivaled the Chinese, Indian and European cultural spheres in importance, and contended that Korea, owing to the existence of the Tan'gun myth, occupied the focal point of this little known cultural sphere, while both Japan and north China, with similar native religious traditions, merely belonged to it<sup>10</sup>.

Japanese studies of Korea cannot be ignored when understanding Ch'oe's theories. Many Japanese scholars expressed the idea of *Nissen dōsoron* (Theory of common ancestry between Japanese and Koreans), which maintained a common origin as well as inferior and superior positions of Koreans and Japanese. Other Japanese scholars concluded that Korea had been historically dominated by influences from the continent, particularly Manchuria<sup>11</sup>. Ch'oe reacted to

<sup>7</sup> Cho, 1964: 178-179.

<sup>8</sup> Robinson, 1988: 73-74.

<sup>9</sup> Yi Nūnghwa (1869-1945) also discussed Korean shamanism in his article "Chosŏn musokko" (On Korean shamanism), published simultaneously with Ch'oe's "Salman'gyo ch'agi" (Notes on shamanism) in 1927. Still, Ch'oe was the first to examine the Tan'gun myth utilizing the modern anthropological concepts of totem, taboo, and shaman. See Im and Janelli 1995, 49-52.

<sup>10</sup> Allen, 1990.

<sup>11</sup> Hatada, 1969: 185-195.

these Japanese studies and reversed their points by placing Korea above Japan and Manchuria<sup>12</sup>. His theories owed much to existing theories and studies, including the linguistic studies of the Altaic language family, the anthropologist Grafton Elliot Smith's (1871-1931) theory of cultural migration, and existing studies of shamanism in Asia.<sup>13</sup> Another important influence came from Taejonggyo, the Korean religion founded in 1906 that revered Tan'gun as the national primogenitor and the source of national pride. Taejonggyo writings not only emphasized Tan'gun's religious tradition as the core of Korea's indigenous ways, but asserted that his descendents, the ancestors of the Korean people, encompassed a large part of northeast Asia including Manchuria and north China<sup>14</sup>.

Ch'oe's theories differed from those of Taejonggyo in that he purposefully included Korea's predominant neighbors, Japan and China, in the northeast Asian cultural sphere so as to place them beneath Korea. His historical views also differed from those of Sin Ch'aeho, who is recognized as a pioneer of Korea's modern historical studies. Sin, also deeply influenced by Social Darwinism and Taejonggyo, paid particular attention to the fact that the ancient ancestors of the Korean people lived in a vast area centered on Manchuria and attempted to further expand territorially; he sought to recover that continental territory in the contemporary world as a political activist<sup>15</sup>. In the process, he stressed the differences between the Korean nation and the rest of the world, and depicted its relationship with neighboring countries as an ongoing series of battles and struggles<sup>16</sup>. By contrast, Ch'oe acknowledged historical and cultural ties between Korea and the rest of northeast Asia, but concurrently contended that Korea held a key position in that entire region.

Ch'oe's presentation of a Korean version of cultural, religious expansionism to counter Japan's ongoing expansionism, however, was not understood by many Koreans. He later expressed:

I mentioned [in "Purham munhwa ron"] that Japan also belonged to the cultural sphere centered on Tan'gun. This of course expressed my academic views, but at the same time conveyed my intent to prepare for the long-term spiritual struggle against the Japanese rule. Some [Koreans] misunderstood

<sup>12</sup> Yi Manyŏl, 1981: 169.

<sup>13</sup> Ch'oe probably read Marie Antoinette Czaplicka's study on shamanism in Siberia. See Im and Janelli, 1995: 52.

<sup>14</sup> Han, 1994: 9-13.

<sup>15</sup> Schmid, 1997: 33-36.

<sup>16</sup> Robinson, 1984: 131.

my argument, harshly criticized me, and spread the false rumor that I was a proponent of the Japanese policy of “*naesŏn ilch'e*” (oneness between Japan and Korea). Nonetheless, whoever reads my treatise should understand that I merely advanced the view that the Tan'gun culture encompassed not only Japan but a large part of the world<sup>17</sup>.

In 1949, when he was arrested as an anti-nationalist, “Purham munhwa ron” was cited as an article that supported the Japanese policy of Korean assimilation<sup>18</sup>. Those who accused his treatise of supporting Japanese views either failed to comprehend it, or simply abhorred the idea that Korea and Japan belonged to the same cultural sphere. What the Koreans wished to hear about at the time was not the commonalities between the two that the Government-General had been publicizing, but Korea's distinctiveness that would reaffirm their national identity.

Ch'oe was not the only one who acknowledged the common cultural, religious heritage in northeast Asia as Japanese scholars had already been discussing the subject. Although academically valid, this argument, unfortunately, was to be utilized by Japan's pan-Asianists for their territorial ambitions and by Ch'oe as his grounds for pro-Japanese acts in the 1930s. At the same time his assertion of Korea's uniqueness as a central nation in northeast Asia, the true theme of his treatises, was not academically well supported. Still, he was initially forceful about both Korea's membership and prominence in the region. When Japanese imperialism proved successful in the very same region, however, he began to lose that subtle balance and no longer emphasized Korea's central role.

### Joining the Korean History Compilation Committee

Those critical of Ch'oe speculate that he had begun working with the Japanese before his entry in the Korean History Compilation Committee in 1928. Kang Tongjin and Song Kŏnho think that the Governor-General Saito Makoto and his officials had provided him with financial support when he published the *Tongmyŏng* and the *Sidae ilbo*. Kang's study of letters written by Governor-General Saito's close assistant in the early 1920s reveals their strategy to induce moderate Korean nationalists, such as Ch'oe In, Ch'oe Namsŏn, and Yi Kwangsu, to accommodate with Japanese policies. One of those letters particularly referred to the possibility of subsidizing Ch'oe Namsŏn's magazine *Tongmyŏng* through the Chŏsen Bank, the central bank of the Government-

<sup>17</sup> Ch'oe, 1949: 532.

<sup>18</sup> Kang Haesu, 2003: 165.

General. Kang thus assumes that Ch'oe's activities in the early 1920s were already funded by the Japanese<sup>19</sup>. Further, Song argues that Ch'oe's article, “Yoksa rŭl t'onghayŏsŏ pon Chosŏnin” (The Korean people as seen through history), published in October 1928, demonstrated his critical perception of the Korean people and skepticism about their readiness for independence<sup>20</sup>.

Although it is true that Saito and his assistants tried to use rewards to win cooperation of selected moderate nationalists in the early 1920s<sup>21</sup>, there is no confirmation as to their financial deals with Ch'oe. The Japanese officials in charge of censorship did not show favoritism for him in any apparent way. The *Sidae ilbo* was strictly censored and often suspended, and its financial difficulties forced Ch'oe to resign from the management. His writings in this period were consistently patriotic, often repeating the theme of awakening to a national consciousness. In 1949, he explained:

I began to lead a literary life at the age of twelve or thirteen and got involved in what was going on in the society at that time. However, I had nothing to do with this matter [of working with the Japanese] until I failed in the newspaper business. The so-called conversion came with my acceptance of their invitation to join the Korean History Compilation Committee. To answer the question of why I made such a change of direction, I only would like to say that I needed a salary and subsequent convenience for my studies when my life-long desire for academic quest was threatened.<sup>22</sup>

He emphasized that his sitting on the committee from 1928 had been the very first experience of working for the Japanese, and confessed that monetary gains were the most important factor in his decision. We should thus examine his financial status at the time.

Ch'oe's financial resources initially came from his father, Ch'oe Hŏn'gyu, a technocrat who passed the late Chŏson dynasty's geography examination and worked for the national observatory as a meteorologist. Thanks to his thriving Chinese medicine business in downtown Seoul, he was affluent enough to send two sons and a daughter to Japan for modern education<sup>23</sup>. He was the primary investor in his second son Namsŏn's activities, including the brief study at Waseda University in Tokyo in 1906 and the publication business beginning

<sup>19</sup> Kang Tongjin, 1979: 396.

<sup>20</sup> Song, 1984: 388-390.

<sup>21</sup> Robinson, 1988: 102.

<sup>22</sup> Ch'oe, 1949: 530.

<sup>23</sup> Yi Yŏnghwa, 2002: 11-15.

with the magazine *Sonyŏn* in 1907. Although Ch'oe's magazines were popular among Korea's young intellectuals, they were far from being economically self-sufficient. Payments were not easily collected, and the Japanese censors sometimes seized all the freshly-printed copies of the magazines. Insufficient funding compelled him to skip many issues and finally discontinue the magazines. Each time he launched new projects, such as the *Chosŏn Kwangmunhoe*, the *Tongmyŏng*, and the *Sidae ilbo*, he incurred more debts<sup>24</sup>.

By 1926, Ch'oe owed 170,000 yen to the Shokusan Bank and additional amounts to private investors. In the spring of that year, he sold all of his printing equipment and building and moved to a small house to help pay back the debts. He still owed 27,000 yen to the bank, and thus made arrangements to pay it off in twenty-year installments. It is said that the creditors who came to demand payments from him in the spring of 1928 found he and his family living in darkness as he could not afford electricity. He needed to earn a large sum of money to pay off his debts, support his growing family, and continue his studies<sup>25</sup>.

It was against this background that he accepted a position in the Korean History Compilation Committee offered by the Government-General. The amount he received for his work on the committee is unknown. We know, however, that in 1939 he received a salary of at least 500 to 800 yen as a professor of Jian'guo University in Manchukuo<sup>26</sup>. Song Kŏnho suspects that Ch'oe received additional amounts from other Japanese organizations and thus had a total monthly income of approximately 2,000 yen at that time. This was an enormous amount of money for a Korean to earn under the Japanese rule. The presidents of the major Korean newspapers, the *Tonga ilbo* (East Asia daily) and the *Chosŏn ilbo* (Korea daily), are said to have earned between 400 and 500 yen a month those days<sup>27</sup>.

Ch'oe's joining the Korean History Compilation Committee in 1928 marked a watershed in his life because he committed himself to working for a Japanese organization for the first time. Although he may have hoped to represent Korean views and make a difference within the organization, one Korean man, no matter how capable he may be, could not possibly effect changes in the Japanese colonial policies. Instead, he became susceptible to Japanese allurements, pressure, and coercion as his livelihood relied upon them.

<sup>24</sup> Cho, 1964: 347.

<sup>25</sup> Cho, 1964: 348.

<sup>26</sup> Miyazawa, 1997: 105.

<sup>27</sup> Song, 1984: 396-399. A Japanese male public school teacher in Korea earned 63 to 112 yen a month in 1934 while a Korean counterpart received only 30 to 55 yen. Korea's per capita annual income was only about 90 yen in 1927 and 1935 (Yi Yungun, 1971: 370, 387).

In 1916, the Government-General initiated a project to compile a new Korean history, suitable for Japanese rule, expressing that conventional Korean histories "had nothing to do with the annexation" and emerging new nationalist histories, such as Pak Ŭnsik's *Han'guk t'ongsa* (The bitter history of Korea), only "cursed the annexation." In 1922, after the March First Movement, the Government-General further emphasized the importance of the history project, formed a committee dedicated to the project, and recruited Korean members.<sup>28</sup>

The primary product of the committee was the *Chōsenshi*, a collection of extracts drawn from important source materials of Korean, Chinese, and Japanese origin, to help reconstruct Korean history from the Three Kingdoms period to the Kabo Reform of 1894. Although massive with thirty-five volumes, it could not possibly include all the historical materials on Korea. The selection of sources naturally reflected the biases prevalent among the Japanese scholars as well as the objectives of the committee to enhance the assimilation policy.

Those who were sympathetic to Ch'oe defended his work on the grounds that he represented Korean historians' views at the Japanese dominated committee. Chin Hakmun, who served as editor in chief of the *Sidae ilbo*, said:

The reason why Ch'oe became a member of the Korean History Compilation Committee is because he sought to assert his theory on the importance of Tan'gun and refute the Japanese scholars who argued against it<sup>29</sup>.

Cho Yongman, the biographer and a close friend of Ch'oe recollected:

Among Korean historians, criticism arose that the Government-General was attempting to fabricate Korean history as part of Japanese history. In order to block this Japanese attempt, we expected the Korean committee members to be vocal. Yet, the four of them, although they were well known, were not forceful enough to fight against the Government-General and Japanese scholars... Ch'oe was the only Korean scholar capable of debating with the Japanese scholars with much dignity<sup>30</sup>.

Ch'oe's did play the role of a spokesman for Korean historians as the remaining fragments of committee discussions demonstrate his sharp disagreements with the Japanese committee members particularly on early Korean history. He urged that the *Chōsenshi* should extend its scope to the north of the

<sup>28</sup> Chōsen sōtokufu Chōsenshi henshūkai, 1938: 1-7. Several Korean scholars, including Yi Nŭnghwa, joined the Korean History Compilation Committee before Ch'oe, Ibid: 126-135.

<sup>29</sup> Chin, 1960: 171.

<sup>30</sup> Cho, 1964: 349.

peninsula to help clarify the origins of the Korean people, and contended that it should include sources on Tan'gun and Kija as the Korean people regarded them as important historical figures. The first three volumes the *Chōsenshi* published by 1933, however, limited themselves to the peninsula and mentioned the two ancient figures in the footnotes only. Ch'oe's efforts were largely in vain as the Japanese simply rejected his views<sup>31</sup>.

Despite his academic disagreements with them, Ch'oe's association with the Japanese began to affect him in a subtle way. In April 1930, he broadcasted on a radio speech titled "Chōson ūi sinhwa wa Ilbon ūi sinhwa" (Korean mythology and Japanese mythology).

Although founding mythologies about descent from heaven exist in China and India as well as in the South Pacific, the exact coincidence seen between Korea and Japan, and in East Asia as a whole centered on Korea and Japan, cannot be overlooked as what we call world historical trends. I cannot help but acknowledge the existence of a clear and systematic relationship<sup>32</sup>.

This statement was not entirely new as his "Purham munhwa ron" had already argued that both Korea and Japan belonged to the northeast Asian cultural sphere. It should be noted, however, that he began to focus on the similarities between Korea and Japan instead of asserting Korea's elevated position in northeast Asia. Unfortunately, the mythologies and religious traditions that he found to be the link between the two countries were exactly what the Japanese would use to promote Korean assimilation.

### To Manchuria and China

Beginning with the Manchurian Incident in 1931, Japan openly began to pursue a course of military expansion on the Asian continent. It established the puppet state Manchukuo in northeastern China in 1932, and left the League of Nations in the following year. Ch'oe's endorsement of the Japanese expansion to China's northeastern region became apparent around this time. His speech entitled "Kami nagara no inishie o omou" (Thinking of the old times of gods), broadcast on the radio in Japanese in 1934, explained that the entire northeastern part of Eurasia as well as Japan and Okinawa shared identical cultural traditions, and that at the core of the traditions was the belief that the heavenly sun-god or goddess had sent offspring to the human world to establish a state. He

<sup>31</sup> Chōsen sōtokufu Chōsenshi henshūkai, 1938: 45-47, 66-70.

<sup>32</sup> Ch'oe, 1930: 37.

called this belief the "way of god(s)" (*kami no michi*), a name almost identical to Japan's Shinto (way of gods), and implied his endorsement of Japan's expansionist venture:

Today, the Asian world faces the most urgent situation ever seen, and the deep hole of misfortune is just below our feet. The ultimate future of all Eastern peoples depends on how to steer in this wild storm. We will survive or collapse, revive or fall...All the peoples of the East should try to overcome past resentment and cooperate in unity, realizing that they are on the same boat in the rough sea. We should create a new world of friendship and coexistence based on a proper foundation, getting rid of all non-Asian threats and temporary obstacles<sup>33</sup>.

In the same speech, he denied the validity of the theory of the common ancestry between Japanese and Koreans.

Neither Koreans nor Japanese have been given a clear ethnological place, and thus it is too early to discuss the ethnic relationship between the two<sup>34</sup>.

Still, his arguments were not dissimilar to the Japanese theories because he no longer insisted on Korea's central position in the region. The Japanese consequently utilized his writings as proof of his support for the theory of the common origins between the two people<sup>35</sup>.

Beginning in 1935, the Government-General drew on resources to promote Shinto as a means to mold the Korean people into obedient subjects of the Japanese empire. In the same year, Ch'oe briefly participated in *Chosŏn kyehoi* (Korean association for purification ceremonies), an organization comprised of Japanese officials and Shinto priests for the purpose of popularizing the Shinto religion among the Korean people<sup>36</sup>. He later explained his true intent as follows:

Assuming that Japanese rule would continue for a long period, I searched for any possible way to establish our belief in the national primogenitor Tan'gun to strengthen our spiritual foundation. I came up with the idea of building a huge Tan'gun shrine at the top of Mt. Paegak, which would overwhelm what was called the Chōson [Shinto] shrine. My logic was that the Japanese could

<sup>33</sup> Ch'oe, 1934: 43.

<sup>34</sup> Ch'oe, 1934: 32.

<sup>35</sup> Pak, 1991: 219. Yi Yŏnghwa calls Ch'oe's theory *Ilson tongwŏn ron* (Theory of a common origin between Japanese and Koreans) as it maintained that Koreans and Japanese shared a cultural (not ethnic) origin. Yi Yŏnghwa, 2002: 123-127.

<sup>36</sup> Yi Yŏnghwa, 2002: 31.

not possibly ignore our desire to honor our primogenitor because their Shinto doctrines required reverence to local deities<sup>37</sup>.

He hoped that Korea's Tan'gun worship could be promoted within the Japanese Shinto practice, believing in the compatibility of the two traditions. It is doubtful that the Japanese seriously considered allowing a large structure dedicated to Tan'gun, the figure that symbolized Korea's autonomous history. In the end, the idea of the Tan'gun shrine did not materialize, and only Ch'oe's acceptance of the Japanese Shinto policy in Korea remained as a fact.

When the Sino-Japanese War broke out with the Japanese military attack on north China in 1937, Ch'oe's focus shifted to the expansion of the Japanese empire on the continent. A month after the outbreak of the war, his article in support of the Japanese war efforts appeared in a special issue of the *Maeil sinbo* (Daily news), the newspaper that voiced the Government-General's views and policies, along with articles by two other prominent Korean intellectuals, Ch'oe In and Yun Ch'ihō.

The white man has invaded Asia ever since the so-called geographic discovery at the end of the medieval period. Most parts of Asia consequently turned into either colonies or led a colony-like existence. Fortunately, Japan was able to secure its autonomy and independence thanks to its consciousness and diligence. Now is an opportune time to bring unity to all of Asia with Japan as its leader, and to consolidate Asian history, life, and glory as opposed to the white people. If China was led by sensible statesmen, it would have allied itself with Japan to be relieved of the fear in the world of East-West confrontation. It is necessary to acknowledge the position and influence of the Japanese empire, the leading stabilizing power in Asia, and cooperate with her modestly. This is the only way for China to survive. The Chinese are stubborn and caught by their trivial emotions. As a result, they are trying to realize restoration of sovereignty and unification of the land by way of resisting Japan<sup>38</sup>.

Ch'oe's scope was no longer limited to the northeast Asian cultural sphere. He saw his contemporary world as the world of East-West confrontation, in which all Asians should unite together under the Japanese flag to free themselves from the white man's domination. Japan was the leader of the Asian world and had the right to punish China for refusing to go along.

<sup>37</sup> Ch'oe, 1949: 532.

<sup>38</sup> Ch'oe, 1937b.

In October of the same year, Ch'oe serially published an article titled "Pukchina ūi t'ŭksusŏng" (Peculiarity of north China) in the *Maeil sinbo*. The article first defined the history of north China as one of constant fighting between the peoples of the northeast Asian cultural sphere and the Han Chinese of the Chinese cultural sphere. The peoples of the northeast Asian cultural sphere, ethnically comprised of Turks, Mongols, and Tungus, further divided into many peoples and tribes, including the Puyŏ and Koguryŏ people, the forefathers of modern Koreans. These northern tribes historically fought with the Chinese for control over the fertile Yellow River Valley, the area that the Chinese should not have monopolized.

Ch'oe divided this history of struggle into four stages. In the first stage, the northern tribes were not fully developed, but the Xiongnu tribe managed to periodically invade the fertile areas of north China during the Zhou, Qin, Han, and Wei dynasties. In the second stage, the northern tribes attained certain sophistication in political and cultural development, and pushed into the Yellow River Valley to establish the short-lived Five Dynasties (907-960). In the third stage, the three northern dynasties of Liao (916-1125), Jin (1115-1234), and Yuan (1264-1368) invaded and ruled over the coveted area one after another. In the fourth stage, the most recent past, the Manchus conquered and ruled China from 1644 through 1911.

Ch'oe emphasized that the ancestors of the Korean people came close to thrusting into the desirable north Chinese region several times. In the early third century, Koguryŏ could have advanced westward to the Yellow River, had it not suffered from invasions by the prince of Liaodong, a general of Wei, and the Xianbei tribes. Again, in the early fourth and fifth centuries, Koguryŏ could have pushed into north China easily, but for challenges by the growing Silla and Paekche dynasties in the southern Korean peninsula. Koguryŏ eventually fell into the hands of the allied forces of Silla and Tang China, and the opportunity for the Korean people to advance to north China never returned<sup>39</sup>.

Based on this historical interpretation, Ch'oe concluded that his day was the fifth stage of the struggle between the northern tribes and the Chinese, and the northern tribes at this time were represented by the Japanese assisted by the Koreans. He did not explain how the Japanese may have descended from the northern tribes, but referred to the fact that they unsuccessfully attempted to thrust into China by way of the Korean peninsula when led by Hideyoshi in the late sixteenth century.

Ch'oe's expansionism, which was expressed only in historical and cultural

<sup>39</sup> Ch'oe, 1937a: 279-286.

terms in the 1920s, took the form of active support of Japanese expansion now that Japan appeared to be the unchallengeable champion in Asia, particularly in Manchuria and north China, a large part of the northeast Asian cultural sphere that he had been discussing.

The northern force that is active at this time had no aggressive history in the Yellow River Valley so far... It is noteworthy that the northern people at the eastern end are now united to be the focal point of history. Moreover, this is not a manifestation of their own struggle or ambition to rule over the Yellow River region, but is for the sake of Asian culture and Asian peoples as a whole<sup>40</sup>.

Ch'oe's strong desire to gain access to Manchuria and north China that the Korean ancestors had controlled or come close to controlling in the ancient period blinded him to the reality that the Japanese were invading the area at the expense of the local population.<sup>41</sup> He did not see an enemy, but rather found a co-worker in the Japanese imperialism seeking control of the region. He was no longer satisfied with depicting Korea's importance in the region in his writings, but came to expect to share in the fruits of the Japanese aggressions in the real world.

While the Japanese invasion of north China was justifiable, the Russian encroachment in the region was not to be forgiven. He wrote in 1938:

The ceaseless aggressiveness of Russia not only threatened the peace of its neighbors but destroyed the order of the world. Previously, its territorial ambitions jeopardized all the surrounding countries. Now called the Soviet Union, it became the common enemy of the whole world because of its ideological conspiracy on top of the territorial ambitions... We [Koreans], who have a glorious history of warding off the eastern invasion of Russia, should determine to continue this effort.<sup>42</sup>

He turned a blind eye to the fact that the current aggressors in the region were not the Russians but the Japanese.

In 1937, Ch'oe became a leading member of the *Choson munyehoe* (Korean literature association), an organization comprised of Japanese and Korean men of letters who supported the Government-General's efforts to

<sup>40</sup> Ch'oe, 1937a: 286-287.

<sup>41</sup> Kang Yŏnghun, a former student at Jian'guo University, recollected Ch'oe's expression of his desire to secure access to Manchuria, the Korean ancestral land, by any means (Kang Yŏnghun, 1990: 150).

<sup>42</sup> Ch'oe, 1938: 299.

make Korea into the depot for Japan's continental expansion. Just as the other of the members of the association, he wrote poems, which were set to music and publicized to advocate the Japanese cause. Although the words of his poems are not extant, their titles amply indicate the militant contents.

"Kim sojwa rŭl saenggakham" (Thinking of Major Kim)

"Chŏngŭi ūi kaega" (Song of righteousness)

"Ch'onghu ti tŭiyong" (Righteousness and courage on the home front)

"Pangho tan'ga" (Song of the defense body)<sup>43</sup>

He was appointed *san'gi* (councilor) of the Chūsūin, the highest honorary position a Korean could attain in Japanese colonial officialdom, in recognition of his service in the compilation of the *Chūsenshi*, completed in 1936. Although he later said that he had never attended to the councilor's duties, he kept that title for a year until he moved to Manchuria<sup>44</sup>.

In 1938, Ch'oe moved to Xinjing, the capital of Manchukuo, as a consultant to the Korean newspaper *Manmong ilbo* (Manchuria-Mongolia daily news), and continued to publish historical and geographical articles. In the same year, Japanese officials of Manchukuo established Jian'guo University in Xinjing, based on a blueprint drawn by Ishihara Kanji, the Japanese general known for his advocacy of Pan-Asianism. The university purported to educate future leaders of Manchukuo and annually admitted Japanese, Manchu (or Chinese), Korean, Taiwanese, and White Russian students based on a quota system, with the largest number given to the Japanese. The administration of the university invited Ch'oe and two Chinese scholars from Beijing to join the Japanese faculty. He accepted the invitation and taught there as a full professor from 1939 to 1942<sup>45</sup>.

The Koreans in Xinjing put up banners to welcome Ch'oe as he was the only Korean representative on the university faculty. He lectured on the history of Manchuria and Mongolia, one of the general education courses at the university, tintured with Korea-centered views<sup>46</sup>. He continued to wear Korean clothes and use his Korean name despite the increasing Japanese pressure to adopt Japanese ways. He was occasionally attacked by young Japanese students and instructors who considered him a Korean nationalist<sup>47</sup>. After the outbreak of

<sup>43</sup> Im, 1966: 78-81; Kim and Kim, 1986: 414-415.

<sup>44</sup> Ch'oe, 1949: 531.

<sup>45</sup> Miyazawa, 1997: 26-46, 97-98.

<sup>46</sup> Miyazawa, 1997: 99; Kang Yŏnghun, 1990: 150.

<sup>47</sup> Cho, 1964: 406-411.

the Pacific War, those who initially invited him were replaced by new officials, who did not tolerate any hint of Korean nationalism<sup>48</sup>. Consequently, he resigned from his position and left Xinjing for Seoul under the pretext of poor health<sup>49</sup>.

During and after his stay in Xinjing, Ch'oe conducted research on the histories and cultures of Manchuria and Mongolia and published his findings in many articles, including "Manmong munhwa" (Culture of Manchuria and Mongolia). He considered the region to be the "land of our forefathers"<sup>50</sup>, and continued to support of the cause of Manchukuo as late as in 1943.

When we examine the historical background of the establishment of Manchukuo, we come to realize that it is not the result of a country's temporary ambition or intention, but it actually is an outcome of a great unavoidable responsibility carried out by the most capable nation at this time<sup>51</sup>.

### The Final Stage

The outbreak of the war between Japan and the United States changed the course of the Japanese empire. Though successful in initial attacks, Japan soon began to show its weakness in the Pacific. It appears that Ch'oe believed from the beginning that Japan would lose the war with the United States. According to a former student of his at Jian'guo University, he predicted Japan's ultimate surrender when all Japanese in Xinjing were celebrating the attack on Pearl Harbor. To astonished Korean and Chinese students, he explained that Japanese industrial power was no match for that of the United States, and Korea would become independent and China would emerge as a major power following the Japanese defeat. After he left Xinjing for Seoul, he continued to write Korean history with no mention of the ongoing war in the Pacific<sup>52</sup>.

In October 1943, the Japanese decided to compel Korean students to enlist in the Japanese army as they desperately needed manpower. Ch'oe's article in the *Maeil sinbo* on November 5 of that year said, "One should have a consciousness that this is a sacred war, above all"<sup>53</sup>. In the same month, he, along with Yi Kwangsu and Yun Ch'ihŏ, visited Japan and addressed Korean students gathered at Meiji University in Tokyo about the importance of enlisting and

<sup>48</sup> Miyazawa, 1997: 158-160.

<sup>49</sup> Ch'oe, 1949: 531.

<sup>50</sup> Ch'oe, 1949: 531.

<sup>51</sup> Ch'oe, 1943a: 415.

<sup>52</sup> Cho, 1964: 411-415.

<sup>53</sup> Ch'oe, 1943b.

fighting for the Japanese empire. His accounts of this trip were published in the *Maeil sinbo* on November 20<sup>54</sup>.

Without Japanese demands, Ch'oe would have remained silent till the end of the war. However, his ties with the Japanese, both official and personal, were too strong to be ignored by this time. Those who had worked with the Japanese could not escape their pressure and coercion to cooperate in the war efforts.<sup>55</sup> In addition, he was in favor of Korean participation in the war at that time.

When the issue of the student volunteers first came up, I expressed from my own viewpoint that many young Koreans should volunteer. Because of this, the Japanese forced me to speak in Tokyo. This war broke out as a consequence of world history, and all the peoples of the world had to eventually take part in it. We knew that the unfortunate could not avoid participating on the wrong side while the fortunate got to participate on the right side. I thought that, taking advantage of this opportunity, our youth, with their ideals, enthusiasm, and talent, could learn to organize, fight and become the core of the society in order to prepare for a new destiny<sup>56</sup>.

He expected that Korean youth would learn important technical and military skills in the Japanese military to prepare them for the future of Korea. He obviously overrated Japan's ability and expected the war with the United States to last longer than it did. It is doubtful whether the Koreans had much to learn from the Japanese military during the last years of the Pacific War when the lack of supplies forced Japan to substitute human bodies for bombs and bullets. In 1949, Ch'oe acknowledged his miscalculation.

The Pacific War ended earlier than I expected, and my suppositions turned out to be useless. What remained was my lack of mercy and justice to Korean students, and another reason to be accused of being an anti-nationalist<sup>57</sup>.

### Conclusion

The reasons why Ch'oe Namsŏn worked for the Japanese organizations and published pro-Japanese writings between 1928 and 1945 are manifold. The

<sup>54</sup> Ch'oe, 1943c.

<sup>55</sup> The biographical video on Ch'oe Sŏnghŏi (1911-?), a successful Korean dancer, illustrates how the Japanese mobilized prominent Koreans like her during the Pacific War (Kultur International Films 2000).

<sup>56</sup> Ch'oe, 1949: 531.

<sup>57</sup> Ch'oe, 1949: 531.

most obvious reason, as he confessed, was his need for money and other conveniences to pursue his academic career. His financial reliance upon the Japanese and his growing ties with them made him susceptible to the pressure from the Government-General over time. This is especially true after the Japanese attempt to win over Korean intellectuals intensified with the arrival of Governor-General Minami Jirō in 1936 and the outbreak of the war with China in 1937<sup>58</sup>. It is likely that Ch'oe at times was compelled to act and write against his will.

Nonetheless, it is obvious that Ch'oe was not paying mere lip service to Japanese expansion. He began writing in support of Japanese expansion in 1934, when the pressure was not yet unbearably strong, and his pro-Japanese writings were too numerous and enthusiastic to be dismissed as lip service. He came to support the Japanese expansionist policies because he thought that Koreans could reap benefit from them. As a historian, he portrayed Korea as a country occupying the most important position in northeast Asia, especially in comparison with China and Japan, in an attempt to uplift Korea's rank in the world. In the process, however, he acknowledged the existence of common cultural and religious traditions in the northeast Asian region, represented by the way of park, and the close cultural link between Korea and Japan in particular. While his argument on the commonalities in northeast Asia was well documented and convincing, his assertion of Korea's superiority and uniqueness in the region was not well established and thus dismissible to many. His attempt to place Korea in the contemporary world was even less successful. As the Japanese empire expanded to northeast and north China, the very same area to which he thought the Koreans had a historical claim, he became increasingly sympathetic to Japanese aggression and recognized Japan as the current leader of the entire northeast Asian peoples.

He emphasized the importance of Korea's indigenous religious tradition that allegedly linked entire northeast Asia, acknowledging its close relation with the Japanese Shinto religion. This unfortunately led him to embrace the Japanese policy of spreading Shinto in Korea, which in fact was part of an attempt to obfuscate the Korean identity and assimilate Koreans into the Japanese empire. His recognition of the strong cultural resemblance between Korea and Japan within the northeast Asian cultural sphere also bolstered the Japanese policy to achieve "oneness between Japanese and Koreans" although he denied the academic validity of the theory of the common ancestry between the two.

<sup>58</sup> Lee, 1965: 263-266.

Both Ch'oe's nationalism and Japanese Pan-Asianism sought to make their respective people into a first-rate nation of power in the world of imperialism where only the strong survived. What separated him from the Japanese was the different reality he faced. While Japan was independent and on the way to becoming an imperial power, Korea was a Japanese colony without hope for immediate independence. Therefore, when the Japanese were seeking to materialize their expansionist desires, he had no means to pursue his aspirations, except for the might of his pen. He used that to place Korea at the forefront of the northeast Asian cultural sphere. If the Korean reality had been different, he might have pursued the same expansionist goals as the Japanese from the beginning. Thus, the weakness in his stance against Japanese imperialism was rooted inherently in his nationalism. In this respect, it was not a great leap for him to come out in support of Japan's continental invasion in the 1930s.

In the final analysis, Ch'oe invariably sought to uplift Korea's position in the changing circumstances of the world of his time.

I am very confident that all my life I have walked a straight path with an unchanging heart. In the process, because of the harshness of the environment and the weakness of my nature, my clothes may have been soiled, and my feet may have been trapped. These changes, however, were merely temporary changes on the surface and never from a change of heart<sup>59</sup>.

Although his methods and expressions shifted over time, his goals for Korea never changed.

#### Glossary

Ch'oe Hŏn'gyu	崔獻圭	Ch'oe In	崔麟
Ch'oe Namsŏn	崔南善	Ch'onghu ūi ūiyong	銃後의 義勇
Chŏngŭi ūi kaega	正義의 凱歌	Chōsensh	朝鮮學史
Chosŏn ilbo	朝鮮日報	Chosŏn kyehoe	朝鮮學會
Chosŏn Kwangmunhoe	朝鮮光文會	Chosŏn munyehoe	朝鮮文藝會
Chungin	中人	Chūsūin	中樞院
Han'guk t'ongsa	韓國痛史	Han	漢
Hideyoshi	秀吉	Ishihara Kanji	石原莞爾
Ilŏn tongwŏnron	朝鮮同濟論	Jian'guo University	建國大學

<sup>59</sup> Ch'oe, 1949: 533.

Jin	金	kami no michi	神の道
Kija	箕子	Kim sojwa rül saenggakham	
Koguryō	高句麗	金少佐를 생각함	
Liang Qichao	梁啓超	Liao	遼
Liaodong	遼東	<i>Maeil sinbo</i>	毎日新(申)報
Manchukuo	滿州國	<i>Manmong ilbo</i>	滿蒙日報
naesŏn ilch'e	內鮮一體	Nissen dōsoron	日鮮同祖論
Pak Ŭnsik	朴殷植	Paegak	白岳
Pangho tan'ga	防護專歌	Pärk	辟
Puyō	扶余	Qin	秦
Saito Makoto	齋藤實	<i>Samguk yusa</i>	三國遺事
san'gi	參議	<i>Sidae ilbo</i>	時代日報
sijo	時調	Silla	新羅
Sin Ch'aeho	申采浩	<i>Sonyŏn</i>	少年
Taejonggyo	大倥教	Tang	唐
Tan'gun	檀君	Tonga ilbo	東亞日報
<i>Tongmyŏng</i>	東明	Wei	魏
Xianbei	鮮卑	Xinjing	新京
Xiongnu	匈奴	Yangban	兩班
Yi Sŏngman	李承晩	Yuan	元
Zhou	周		

**Abbreviation**

YCNC *Yuktang Ch'oe Namsŏn chŏnjip* 六堂崔南善全集 1973-1975. Edited by Yuktang chŏnjip p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe 六堂全集編纂委員會, 15Vol. Seoul: Hyŏnamsa.

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