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A 1944 Korean Rebellion Within the Japanese Army: The Testimony of Lieutenant Cheon Sanghwa

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Kiriyama Keiichi

Translated by Nobuko ADACHI

Korean students secretly planned a rebellion in the 30th Division of the Japanese army based in Heijyo (now Pyongyang, in North Korea). Cheon Sanghwa, a staff officer, was a participant in the plan. He fought against Japan for an independent Korea. [2] By sabotaging the Japanese army from inside, he contributed to Japan's defeat in the Second World War. This was in 1944. Now eighty-seven years old, he lives in Seoul. This year is the 65th anniversary of Korean students departing for the front. These students, who were not subject to the normal draft, were forced to volunteer for the Japanese army. Wishing for the independence of their country from Japan, they must have felt conflicted over volunteering. This is "the verbatim record" of the life and death experiences of Cheon Sanghwa.

What was the underground organization called the Party of Three Thousand?

My name was Takayama Jun'ichi during Japanese rule of Korea. [3] I skipped a grade to graduate from the metallurgy course at Taedong Industrial Technical School in Heijyo in September, 1943. I was to work for the Chinnam-p'o West Coast Refinery in P'yongan Namdo (in current North Korea). However, in October, I was forced to volunteer to join the Japanese army. When I took the physical to enter the army in December, they found that I had a pulmonary inflammation, so I failed, getting a "third grade health" deferment. I thought that if I were to go to the front, I would die. Thus, I felt as if I was given a new lease on life. I was very happy about this.

However, the army in Keijyo (Gyeongseong, or current-day Seoul) later ordered that, "Even those with third grade health deferments should receive training to prepare to go to war." When a farewell party was held at the prefectural community center for those going off for training, I put a couple of stones in my pocket, and instead of sitting on a chair, I kept standing near the speaker's platform. This was because the Viceroy for Korea, Koiso Kuniaki, was coming to talk to us and I wanted to pelt him with stones. But I could not do it. I lacked the courage. While struggling with my feelings, another Korean student said, "Viceroy!" The hall became silent. He continued, "Cheers for Korea!" He then sarcastically added, "Cheers for the Great Japanese Empire!" Then I heard another voice saying, "Viceroy!" from the second floor. "Would you please make Korea a nice country before we die in battle?" These were the voices of resistance to Japan. The two were seized by their arms and legs and dragged out of the hall. I do not know what happened to them after that.

We Korean students were inducted on January 20, 1944. I was placed in the 42nd Regiment of the 30th Infantry Division located in the suburbs of Heijyo. This unit was also called the Akiotsu Regiment. When I changed my Korean clothes to a Japanese army uniform, which was dirty and old, I felt miserable. My unit included some fifty Korean students.

It was said that the reason the Japanese Navy did not take any Korean students was that if they were to revolt, the warships could sink, and they were very afraid of that. However, the army took about five thousand Korean students.

How terrible the Japanese soldiers treated us new recruits! Recruits were hit everyday for any kind of reason, like a bed not being properly made, or a uniform not being correctly worn. Things like that. Recruits had to look after the higher ranks' equipment and I was hit because the muzzle of a senior's rifle had some rust. However, later I heard Japanese enlisted men say, "Don't hit the Koreans too much because they have more education than we do!"

Since the Korean students were from the upper classes, we were usually physically bigger than the average Japanese soldiers, who were very short. Me too; I was big. I was five foot eight, 185 pounds, built like a bear. I participated in a sumo match with a Japanese soldier who was a fourth-degree black belt in judo. The first round was tie as both of us went down to the ground at the same time. In the second round I applied a back throw and kept holding onto his body under me. As I pressed his chest hard with my body, he cried "Ouch!" I slowly and nervously stood up and said, "Should we do it again?" I was a merciless "renegade Korean." (Laughing)

About twenty to thirty of the fifty Korean students often got together on a grassy knoll. There every night we talked about our anti-Japanese sentiments and independence for Korea. We had to obey the Japanese army during the day, but at night we were free. Deep in our hearts we prepared to die for Korean independence.

We came to conclude that we should not just talk about independence. We should organize an association and do something. This was sometime in May of 1944. Later we named our association "The Party of Three Thousand" at the suggestion of Kim Wanyong. He was a graduate of Chuo University. The name came from the population of Korea at that time: thirty million. In Korean, thirty million is written as three thousand ten-thousand units. The name was unanimously chosen by us.

"Occupy the headquarters!"

We elected as leader of the party Kim Wanyong. He was five or six years older than us. We chose three lieutenants. They were Pak Seonghwa who was a student at Waseda University, Yi Tosu a student of the Miyazaki Agriculture and Forestry High School (under the old educational system), and myself, Cheon Sanghwa.

Based on "the Spirit of 3-1," our purpose was to fight against the Japanese who were occupying our nation. The name "3-1" referred to the most important anti-Japanese independent movement which began on March 1, 1919. We decided to try to sabotage the Japanese army from within, hoping the chaos would help lead to Japan's defeat. These were the sort of aims we had.

We divided into three units, based on the Korean regions of Hambuk-táe,Hannnam-táe and P'yeongan-táe. I was the commander of the P'yeongan unit which consisted of students from that region (Pyongan Rukto and Pyongan Namdo). I think each unit consisted of about ten students.

In the Akiotsu district, other than the 42nd Division, there were the 47th Division and the 50th Division, and in the Heijyo area there were the 44th and the 48th Divisions. We tried to communicate with Korean students in those divisions and to expand our association. However, we could not communicate well between the divisions so even now I do not know how many students were actually involved in the Party of Three Thousand.

Our leader Kim said he would get poison. We would poison in soldier's food in the kitchen on the day of the revolt. We would try to murder the Japanese soldiers by poison! If I remember our plan correctly, it was something like this. After poisoning the food, members of each unit would attack their guardhouses, take ammunition, and occupy the main office. After the 42nd Division would take over the headquarter of the army corps, members from the 50th Division would take over the Akiotsu military-police battalion, the 47th Division would take over the area of the commissioned officers residence, while those from the 44th Division would take over the broadcasting station, and those from the 48th would take over the army's ammunition dump.

We asked a female student to pass information to each unit. A student from the Seimon Women's High-school in Heijyo was working as a "volunteer-laborer." She came to mend the soldiers' clothes and she became a friend. There was also a nurse called Hwagi at the army hospital of the 30th Division. I did not know—and still do not know—her last name, but she was a Korean and she was in charge of passing along information. Since patients came in from every unit, she could pass information through them. We had no other way to communicate with the units.

The information she passed on were things like "Since it's getting cold and it will be very difficult to carry out our plan soon, we should start things before fall." Also, the day we were to mix poison in the food, Korean students were not suppose to eat, so we had to decide on the date and somehow inform everyone.

One day Kim, the leader of the Party of Three Thousand, decided that the rebellion should take place on October 1st. We knew that if we made a mistake, we would be caught and killed. So we also made a backup plan in case we failed. We would flee to Mt. Paektusan. A civilian who was working for Korean independence would take us to the mountain. I met him just before the day of rebellion at the meeting room of the 42nd Division. However, on the meeting day our leader Kim did not show up, and he was also missing on the day of the rebellion. We gathered at the usual spot and decided to postpone the date to October 30th. Later we learned that Kim had been transferred to another unit. His disappearance, then, was temporary.

Everyone was arrested in one fell swoop

Here is how the Korean student rebellion was discovered. There was a man named No Yeongjun in our association who was the son of a very rich family. One day his childhood friend, Im Yeongho, came to see him. Im was a son of No's tenant farmer. Im was an assistant military-police officer in the Japanese Army. I guess Im felt something strange was going on with the Korean students. We did not tell him about the rebellion, because a pro-Japanese like him was a traitor, and I still feel that had he been killed by our poison, that was ok.

Each time Im and No met, Im only bad-mouthed Japan, and he told No that he knew of people in Manchuria who were trying for Korean Independence. In Korea there is the proverb "There is no tree that cannot be cut down if we try ten times." Im tried to win No over, saying he would help get a car for No so that he could flee to Manchuria and be free from the Japanese army. They were childhood friends and went to elementary school together so No believed Im, and told him that there were Korean students who had organized an anti-Japan association. This was the tipoff, and the Japanese military-police caught all of us on October 24th.

I also heard that our chief, Kim, went out to drink with several students. When he got drunk he told our plan for attacking the Japanese Army—and the existence of the Korean independence movement—to a geisha who was working at the bar. She was assistant military-police officer Im's spy.

Whatever the source of the leak, the Japanese police knew everything about our rebellion. When the other students were arrested, I was in the mountains, about twenty kilometers from Heijyo. It was near Longcheng Township. I had been stationed there as a sentry. I wondered if the place was a storage lot for Japanese mines and bombs.

My friend Yi Chonghwa was by chance also sent to this post. He had entered the army with Chu Myeongseok. He was one of my three best friends. Shaking, Yi said to me, "This is terrible! The Japanese have discovered our plan!" He also told me that our comrades had been caught by the military police.

I finished my duties at the secret post a month later. I was very scared about coming back to Heijyo Train Station. Although I was not caught at the train station, as I suspected, the military police came for me the next day. I was arrested and charged with "Breaching Public Order" on November 28th.

The Akiotsu military-police station could not accommodate all of us, and many of us were sitting in the hallway handcuffed to each other. A military-police officer said, "Take out everything you have in your pockets and place them on the table." I did take out my handkerchief, but I kept my money. Fortunately they did not check my pockets.

I was not asked many things on the first day of interrogation. A police officer held someone's statement and read it: "In order to gain independence for our nation, we organized a secret association ... poison soldiers ... uprising ...," and so on. I just kept repeating "I have done nothing like that." When I peeked at the paper I saw a name, Ujihara Toshihiro. This was the Japanese name of one of our three staff officers, Pak Seonghwa/朴性和. How shameful to tell our plans to the Japanese.

After saying "I know nothing" on the first day, I was handcuffed to another person and left to sit in the hallway. This was to prevent us from running away. I could not sleep that night. I knew they would interrogate me harshly the following day. After thinking it over, I decided to escape.

An endless runaway trip

It was four in the morning of the next day, November 29th. I called out, "Sir, may I go to the bathroom? I have a stomach ache, and I am about to vomit." The officer took off the handcuffs and said, "Don't vomit here!" When I entered a bathroom, he told me to come out quickly. I guess the distance between him and me was about five to six meters. I thought that next time they put me in handcuffs, it would be the end of my life.

"Sir, could I drink some water at the sink?" I asked. "You may," he told me. I put a little water in my mouth and drank it. I breathed in deeply a couple of times. When I glanced at the officer, he was kicking a stone. I thought, "Now is the chance" and dashed over to him and hit him in the face with my "bear" punch. I hit him directly in the left cheek.

He fell with a groan, but then immediately cried out "Escape!" Even as I ran from the station, I knew that there were guards at every strategic point all over Akiotsu. Furthermore, there were army dogs as well. But at that moment I just ran out the main gate as fast I could.

I kept running through the hills and fields. I headed south. I realized I was running barefoot. The slippers I was wearing in the station had fallen off long ago. Because crops in the fields had already been harvested, and the grass cut in the mountains, the stalks and stems pierced my feet like needles. Then rain started pouring over my head.

But I was only worried about what was behind me. My pursuers must be closing in on me after all, and I will be caught. I gave up, and decided to kill myself.

I had two cords in my pants pocket. I tied them up on a tree branch and tried to hang myself. But I passed out as soon as I did so.

I wonder if it was fate that, without consciousness, I put my finger between the cord and my throat. When I regained consciousness, I realized that I was still alive. I started walking again. By dawn, I had arrived at a village town called Chunghwa. I had walked sixteen kilometers that night.

When I got close to the village, I looked for the poorest house. I begged an old woman in her seventies, “Please let me rest here a bit.” When I entered her house I saw a pile of sweet potatoes in the corner. In Korea we make baskets with sugar cane and save sweet potatoes in them, and eat the sweet potatoes over the winter until the coming spring. She cooked sweet potatoes for me. After I ate them, I became very sleepy, being extremely tired. The old woman told me to sleep at her house and I fell asleep in the morning. I think I stayed at her place for a couple of days until he pain in my feet went away.

I tried to get to Yandok City, which was a little less than a hundred kilometers from Heijyo. Near there was the home of the grandmother of my best friend, Yi Chonghwa. Yi told me that if we could stay at her house deep in the mountains we would not be found by the Japanese. I started to walk in the mountains to get there. I changed my army uniform to peasant clothes. With the help of many Koreans, I finally arrived at Yi’s grandmother’s house in mid-December.

I begged her to let me stay at her place if only for the winter. But her answer was “No!” Shaking her head she said, “Leave.” I thought, then, that if I was going to die, I would like to see my mother one last time. So I started to walk to my home.

My hometown is located on the outskirts of a town called Hàncheon/漢川, northwest of Heijyo. My mother’s name was Kang Seongok. I was born when she was forty years old. My father, Cheon Seongjin passed away six months after I was born. Our house was a small straw-thatched hut. My mother did not eat much or have many clothes. She had to be extremely frugal because we were so poor. Even the children of peasants had at least some new clothes; we wore only old clothes, but they were always washed.

So I always thought we were poor, but somehow we became the second richest family in the village. My brother, Cheon Sangju,went to Anju Agricultural High School and became a secretary in the finance co-op which gave fiscal guidance to this agricultural village. He is very successful. I went to Kousei High School in Heijyo, and after I graduated I went to Taedong Industrial Technical School. In those days only half of the village children could go to even elementary school.

I saw my mother about a month after I ran away from the army. My mother just cried. I, too, thought we would never see each other again. I sat near the hibachi stove. My mother changed my clothes to Korean clothes padded with cotton. If a villager found out about me staying there, they would talk about me, so I hid under a pile of straw to sleep that night. My mother made me a lunch box, and before dawn I left. It was heartbreaking. That was January 15, 1945.

I had on my padded Korean jacket, however that winter was the coldest in sixty years, so sometimes I passed out in the mountains and fields. For many days I did not eat at all. It was a miracle that I did not die in these minus ten and twenty degree (Fahrenheit) temperatures in the condition I was in.

[Summarizing Cheon’s escape, he went on to Suncheon to Kaecheon and Kanggye, Huchang, Huchang-kanko. He crossed northern Korea heading toward the Manchurian border. Along the way he hitched a ride on a train, but when you measure the distance from Heijyo to the northwest, he must have walked roughly 300 kilometers.]

Torture and court-martial

I was caught by guards at the Korean-Manchurian border. The name of the place was Kim Chandong) in P’yeongan Pukto Huchanggun (current Kimhyŏngjik-kun). When I was walking in the mountains along the Yalu River, I was noticed by a Japanese sergeant. It seemed that many people had tried to flee to Manchuria from here. When I heard a voice say, “Hey, You!” I punched him. He fell down into the valley. However, there was one more cop, a Korean policeman, and he shouted, “Catch him!” and five or six peasants who were lumberjacking in the valley surrounded me.

I told them that I was a Korean separatist. “You shouldn’t capture me!” But while they were knocking the snow off my clothes, they repeatedly said, “We’re sorry.” It was January 21st. I had entered the army on January 20, 1944. So it was exactly one year later that I was captured.

I was held at the police station in Chunggangjin [a city located up the Yalu River], and handed over to a Japanese military police officer from the Akiotsu district who came to pick me up. We crossed the bridge over the Yalu River to Manchuria. We took a train in Rimgang, Manchuria, and changed trains at Tsuka (Tonghua) Station, and again crossed the border back to Korea. We passed Manpochin and arrived at Heijyo on January 26th.

When I was caught, I hated God, but when I walked into the military police-station, I said “Thank you, Lord!” My mother, brother, and brother’s wife had all been taken to the military police station. They had been tortured during their interrogations, with the questioners shouting, “You are hiding him!” Because of me, my brother was beaten so badly that his leg became dislocated. If I had not been arrested, my whole family would have died.

The police interrogators were told, “Don’t kill him, we need to question him.” The tortures inflicted by these two officers were terrible. They beat me wildly all over my head, back, and stomach; wherever they could hit me with a thick bamboo stick. When I fainted they took me to the bathroom and took off my clothes and poured water over me. It was about minus five degrees (Fahrenheit) outside. The handcuffs froze to my skin. They kept me kneeling on the floor with a pole over my calves and thighs. They would then twist my legs almost to the point of breaking. When I passed out, they poured water over me; when I woke, they beat me again, and I passed out once more.

The investigation took about a month and half, and ended on March 5, 1945. I appeared before a court-martial and was sentenced to eight years in prison on June 10, 1945.

[The court papers still survive. I read the verdict saying, “This court-martial has determined the sentence of Takayama Jun’ichi—who violated the Peace Preservation Law, committed theft and aggravated escape—to be eight years in prison. Theft here refers to stealing overcoats and other military goods during the planning of an uprising.”]

Twenty seven members of the Party of Three Thousand, and one civilian, were convicted and sentenced. Kim, the leader, received nine years in prison, Staff Officer Pak was given thirteen years, and Yi five years. Since Pak had applied to be—and was accepted as—a Japanese military cadet, he was hated by the army more than the rest of us.

There were six times more prisoners in the Heijyo Prison than it could hold As a result, there were seven or eight persons to a cell and only the sick could lie down. The rest of us leaned our heads against the wall and slept standing. Our meals were a mixture of several grains such as beans, millet, and rice, but it was more like a soup. And the amount was less than the size of a fist. We were very hungry. When someone died, the gate of the prison opened. When we heard the sound of the door, it meant another person died. If we heard it twice, it meant two had died. I heard the door twenty or thirty times a day.

Tears of joy for “Japan has surrendered!”

I had been telling the other prisoners that Japan would lose the war by August. Their poor military equipment, the quality of their soldiers, the vast area of land they had to cover—all this spelled certain defeat to me. But during this period, even people who had eyes could not really believe that Japan would lose. I think that in my case it was more a feeling that God would not forgive the Japanese for their unscrupulous acts, more than any rational conclusion, that led to my belief.

Some prisoners went to work after breakfast. These were those with light sentences—people that the Japanese thought would not try to escape. They told me that they were digging a moat. I was sure that the Japanese were planning to bury us alive there. I said to myself that if they ever came back from work earlier than usual, the war was over.

One day they *did* come back early, and I said to my cellmate, "Japan has been defeated." Soon after, we heard someone banging on the bars of the cell, which usually was the sign for lunch. I put my ear through the bars and heard, "Japan has surrendered." The tears just fell. I could not think of anything. It was August 15th.

Around ten in the morning the following day, we were told by a Korean guard, "Students, get out of here!" We changed into the clothes of the people who had been executed, and left. I was only skin and bones. I was the first person who left through the prison gate. There were voices all over shouting, "Choseon Manse, Choseon Manse," Long Live Korea. I could not move because it was so crowded everywhere.

More battles

After the war ended I worked at the Ministry of Industry the newly established independent nation of Korea. I think that, although I was only twenty-four years old, I got the position because I helped plan the independence-rebellion against the Japanese occupation and I was sentenced to eight years in prison.

However, I was opposed to communism. It was because they took the farmers' land and made them state property. My mother obtained her property through her hard work, but the new government took it and left her with only one-tenth—or maybe even one-twentieth—of her farm. The government saw me then as a "reactionary element." In 1947 I was sentenced to a year and half in prison in a court trial. However, I was released after serving just a month and a half of the sentence. Again, this was because I had received an eight year prison sentence from the Japanese for struggling for independence; they could not, in clear conscience, keep such a person in prison.

I became a mathematics teacher at an industrial technical school. But I fled to the South in the summer of 1948. I did not tell my mother about my plans. If she had known, she would be charged as a criminal. I took a fishing boat down the Han River from my hometown. It was already impossible to cross the 38th Parallel on foot. More accurately, this fishing boat was a sailboat without an engine. An acquaintance from elementary school days owned the boat, and I took it.

On the way there was a rainstorm, and we went up the Incheon two days later. I married in July, 1947, and my wife crossed the 38th Parallel carrying our baby on her back in September, 1948. It was easier for women to cross the border, so we went separately. She told the guards, "I am going to see my relatives in Haeju." Haeju is a town at the seashore by the 38th Parallel. She walked to the South, soaking in seawater up to her waist. It was impossible for us to take my elderly mother with us.

I was hired as a mathematics teacher at Tongesan High School in Incheon town in October, 1948. Soon the Korean War started. This was June, 1950. Having been a student soldier previously, I could not just watch the war. I volunteered and was appointed a second lieutenant. Being a commander of a small unit at the front, I was simply an "expendable object." I fought around Weonju at Kangweondo (about 100 kilometers away from Seoul). Our orders were to just push forward; if we did not, we would have been executed by a firing squad by our own army. So we had to move forward. There were many corpses at the front. I saw about seventy or eighty dead soldiers.

The enemy's bullet went though from my right chest to my back. [Lifting his shirt, Mr. Cheon showed me his old wound. I saw stitches from his right chest to the center of the back.] Seeing so much blood flowing, I thought I would die. So I told my men to bury me deep in the ground. But I woke up on straw in a school classroom. It was a temporary military hospital. Later I was transferred to another hospital in Pusan.

I became a "National Meritorious Person"

I went to the United States in 1952 and studied at an army infantry school. I became a faculty member in the mathematics department at the South Korean military academy. I taught there for ten years. Around that time I started writing a book, *Cheonmyeong [Destiny],* which was about my experiences during the Japanese colonial period. It was privately published with 300 copies. I was appointed as a lieutenant colonel and transferred to the reserves in 1966. I became principal of a school in Incheon City in 1974.

I received a medal from President No Taewoo in 1990 for "contributions to national independence and national development." I was also chosen to be "a national Meritorious Person" by President Kim Youngsam. I now receive a pension from the military as well as a pension for merit, and a disability pension for service during the Koran war. I receive quite a bit of money.

There are only three people still alive, including myself, of the Party of Three Thousand. One person spends his days confined to bed and the other is also sick. Looking back, I think it was too large-scale a plan to ever succeed. It would have been impossible for just thirty student soldiers to occupy the headquarters of 30 units commanding twenty thousands soldiers. I think we just wished to show our resistance and to demonstrate our valor so that others would follow our path later.

I was a staff officer during the uprising, and furthermore I ran away from the army ... so I thought I would receive a death sentence. However, I only got eight years in prison. That was probably because in those days things were becoming difficult for Japan and they were not sure about foreign affairs. They worried that the student uprising would lead to other uprisings, so they kept us a secret. Even if our plan was impossible to carry out, it would have been significant if the public had learned about it—that there were those who plotted treason against Japan. I now think that was enough for us.

[I interviewed Mr. Cheon on Chuseok, the day of the Festival of the Dead (Bon) of the old Korean calendar. This is an important day for people to show respect for their ancestors. I asked him about his mother who he had left behind in North Korea. When did she die? He answered, "I don't know" and tears came to his eyes. He grumbled to himself, "Mother" and cried.

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Translator's Notes

[1] I thank Dr. Ronald Toby of the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and Dr. Sonia Ryang of the University of Iowa for their kindness and help in reading Korean proper names.

[2] Korea was annexed by Japan from 1910-1945.

[3] Koreans were forced to take Japanese names.