

Woonsang Choi - Korean patriot who aided Unificationists in unifying the Koreas

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Dr. Choi meeting Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1917–1984) while he was Korea's Ambassador to India. India was a non-aligned nation, so fierce competition arose North Korea and South Korea for the Indian government's attention. Opposite: The first official Korean Embassy in Washington D. C.

I first became aware of Dr. Woonsang Choi in 2008 by way of Dr. Choi's sterling English language skills, as the interviewer overheard him speaking to members of UPF's IIPC (Inter-religious and International Peace Council) through his open office door in the Dowon Building, in Seoul's Mapo Borough. An octogenarian at the time, Dr. Choi had been a professor of law for the previous twenty-seven years. In the nearly thirty-three years before that, he had a distinguished career in the diplomatic field, serving in the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and as the Korean Ambassador to India, Egypt, Morocco, Jamaica and the Caribbean.

As an UPF ambassador for peace, Dr. Choi was indefatigable. He spoke at conferences. He was an invaluable asset in helping IIPC members develop contacts within the Seoul diplomatic community. He often helped in the Japanese IIPC office, preparing documents in English and Korean. On the days that he worked in the Dowon Building, rather in the university where he was a professor or elsewhere, his was often the last light extinguished on our floor.

Dr. Choi was a gentleman. He was kind, modest and generous of heart. He graciously consented to being interviewed, so he could share with our readers some of the areas in which his personal history is interwoven with Korean history.

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Question: You began your diplomatic career under South Korea's first president. Could you tell our readers something about President Syngman Rhee

Professor **Choi:** I took my Foreign Service exam in November 1948, and I was first among four hundred in the exam. Forty from the first batch were taken to establish the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which had been abolished in 1910 when Japan took over Korea. We had to reestablish a foreign office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

I initially I was the private secretary to the Foreign Affairs Minister. Then I received an appointment to go to Washington DC as the third secretary of the just-established Korean Embassy in Washington -- the first Korean mission abroad. I was to be Korea's first career diplomat abroad, in April 1949. When President

Rhee learned of this fact, he summoned me to take the oath of office in his presence. The president's office is now called the Blue House, but at that time it was called Gyongmudae, and to Gyongmudae I went on April 20, 1949.



In June 1961, a month after the Supreme Council of National Reconstruction (SCNR) toppled Prime Minister John M. Chang's government, SCNR went on an inspection of government ministries. Ambassador Choi kept a low profile during this treacherous period.

That same day, the American ambassador, John J. Muccio, presented his credentials as the American ambassador to Korea. President Rhee, after receiving his credentials, was overcome by emotions. He had not been well received in the past when he tried to meet U.S. State Department officials to plead the cause of Korea's independence. Now, here was the American ambassador personally presenting credentials from the president of the United States, Harry S. Truman. President Rhee was overwhelmed.

His secretary came in and handed a single-page statement in English to President Rhee and he began to read it, but since his eyes were blurring, he asked me to complete the reading. I discovered it was the same oath of office that American foreign service officers swore to uphold when they took office. I read it and President Rhee asked me to sign it. I signed it and that completed the ceremony.

Then he gave a lecture, saying now that we have a new government and are going to be an important part of the international community, we should play an honorable role in international diplomacy. He said that in diplomacy, regardless of rank, whether it's third secretary or the ambassador, you represent Korea, so you should keep this in mind and conduct yourself accordingly.

Then he thrust out his hand and I shook it. I felt a great deal of warmth from his palm and his grip was strong and firm. He was already over eighty at that time and I had great admiration for his sacrifice and contribution toward Korea's independence over the past forty years at that time. That was my impression. It was the first and last time I saw him.

To this day, I still remember very clearly what happened on that day. Francesca [President Rhee's Austrian wife] was there as were two government ministers, the minister of Domestic Affairs, Hyo-suk Kim, and the Minister of National Defense, Sung-mo Shin. Francesca walked in and asked the ministers to leave because there would be an important ceremony. I felt a little uncomfortable because they were cabinet ministers, and I was only a third secretary, but to her or to the president the ceremony was deeply symbolic and important enough that the ministers had to leave.

Question: You worked under Ambassador Chang, the first Korean ambassador to the US.

John Myun Chang was my confirmation godfather. [In the Catholic tradition] you are baptized as an infant, but when you reach your majority, over twenty, your faith is confirmed; you need another godfather for the confirmation. I was then attending Seoul National University Law School and was

active in the Catholic Youth Association. I thought it would be nice to ask him to be my godfather. He was just elected to the National Assembly from Seoul's Jongro District, but he was quite willing to be my godfather, and he came on time when there was to be the ceremony.

I campaigned for him when he was running for the National Assembly; this was May 10, 1948, the first ever elections to establish the Korean government under the supervision of the United Nations.

All the Catholic Youth students were volunteer campaigners for him. On the day of the election, I was one of the watchmen and his representative at one of the voting places. He came around and saw me. He was surprised that I was working as his campaigner, but absolutely it was on a voluntary basis. He then became the Korean delegate to the United Nations. He secured United Nations' recognition in the form of a General Assembly Resolution that South Korea had the only lawful government in all Korea. This was at the Second General Assembly held in Paris in the winter of 1948.

Soon after that, he was appointed as the first Korean ambassador to Washington. I wrote him congratulating him on the appointment and offering to work for him if he needed me. I think he was responsible for suggesting that I get sent to Washington as the first Korean diplomat.



Question: Was it the same John M. Chang that became prime minister

Yes, after the student revolution of April 19, 1960. That year, in March, the presidential elections were rigged. It was a known fact, and people arose to overthrow the Rhee government. Syngman Rhee did not know the elections were rigged; his supporters had acted badly. Students demonstrated all over the country but particularly in Seoul. Later, professors also came out in support of change or a new election.

At the time, people felt that a presidential system has a tendency to make the president dictatorial or authoritarian, so we should change to a parliamentary system like in Great Britain or other European countries. So, they amended the Constitution. We kept the office of the president, but he was a ceremonial head like the emperor in Japan. The real power would be vested in the cabinet, which would be elected by the party that commands the majority in the National Assembly. Under that system, the prime minister is the real power. The former ambassador to Washington, Dr. John M. Chang, was elected to be prime minister of the ruling party. That was in late summer 1960, and in turn he was overthrown by the military coup d'état in May of 1961.

Question: What happened to Prime Minister Chang because of the coup d'état

He went into hiding and later came out. He was afraid of being shot; therefore, he escaped into a Catholic nunnery. He survived. When he saw the situation, in order not to disturb the stability of the country, he voluntarily resigned his whole government. Chung-hee Park took over as the military governor. Civilian rule returned in 1963 and Chung-hee Park became president under civilian rule.

Question: For part of your more than thirty years in the diplomatic corps you served under Chung-hee Park.

The two most popular Korean presidents in a recent survey were Chung-hee Park and Syngman Rhee. I know that Chunghee Park was a dictator, but he greatly helped the development of the country. He made things happen that no one else believed could happen, such as the Seoul to Busan highway. He would order Korean industrialists to do things no matter what the obstacles, such as building a steel processing plant.

He would sometimes ask my opinion about things. For example, when I was the ambassador to Egypt during the Yom Kippur War in 1973, they were destroying Israeli tanks with handheld rockets. This was a completely different type of warfare. In World War I, war was fought from trenches, and in World War II infantrymen would follow behind tanks. But using Russian rockets, the Egyptians were able to knock out Israeli tanks. The Egyptian military invited a group of ambassadors to inspect the fighting fields. The Israelis had bunkers beside the Suez Canal, protected by a large sand dune. The Egyptians used a Russian-made collapsible pontoon bridge to cross the canal, and they had powerful water cannons that destroyed the sand dune. I reported to President Park about this during a two-hour face-to-face meeting.

I would sometimes write him letters. Korea was in the market to buy railroad tanker cars and other ones that transported coal. The Korean ambassadors to Germany and Belgium had suggested we buy these from the countries they were assigned to. I wrote a letter to President Park and suggested we buy them from India, which would build them to international standards for a fair price. I argued that it was a non-aligned nation that we should develop a relationship with. President Park agreed and wrote on my letter, "Do as Ambassador Choi says." India earned about eleven million dollars -- a large foreign exchange income -- and their attitude toward Korea improved greatly.



Question: I'd like to backtrack a bit. You were working in your embassy in Washington DC when the Korean War broke out. How did you learn of the war and how did your embassy respond

I had gone out that night with an attaché; we had gone to watch an opera on the Potomac River and then to a beer hall. It was a Saturday night, I had bought a Sunday newspaper, but in those days, the Evening Star would have the comics section on the outside of the Sunday paper, so I did not see the headline, which already had news of the Korean War on June 24 (June 25 in Korea). First Secretary Pyo-wook Han, saw on the ten o'clock news that war had erupted and rushed to the embassy, but it was deserted. He thought he should go to the US State Department. He rushed there, where he found Ambassador Chang. I had gone home to my apartment.

Somehow, the attaché had been contacted and he called me. I went to the State Department. The whole building was lit up though it was late at night. The person in charge of the Korean Desk, Niles Bond, and others in the State Department were arriving. The State Department had a way of contacting their people. Some of them had been at a party and were in tuxedos or formal dresses. President Truman was in Independence, Missouri. Secretary of State Dean Acheson was at his farm in Virginia.

Acheson called Truman after 11:00 pm. They discussed the situation and decided to call a meeting of the United Nations Security Council. Phone calls were made until 3:00 AM by UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie to all eleven members of the Security Council, including the Soviet Union. The latter chose not to attend the meeting. Ambassador Chang and First Secretary Han went by State Department airplane to New York the next day. It was a propeller plane in those days; it left from DC's National Airport and took an hour to get to LaGuardia Airport in New York. En route they drafted a resolution that the Security Council later approved.

After that, the ambassador and first secretary spent a lot of time in New York. I had to take care of the Korean Embassy in Washington. The next day a block-long line of people stood outside our door offering to volunteer to fight for Korea. There was a man whose fighter squadron from World War II were still in contact with each other. They had fought in Europe.

He said if we got them planes, they were ready to fight. Another man had bought the World War II torpedo boat that he had served on, from the Navy. It had been stripped of its weapons before the government sold it as surplus equipment. He told me if we would just reinstall the cannons and machine guns, he and his old crew from the Second World War would fight with it in Korea. There was nothing I could do but take their names and phone numbers.

The embassy was so busy with people calling to hear information about their families back in Korea. I was so busy that for a few months I slept in the Korean Embassy. I brought a mattress there and put it on top of the desks.

Question: Do you recall who the Soviet representative to the UN was

It was Malik. Jacob Malik was the Soviet delegate to the United Nations. The Soviet Union boycotted the United Nations from October 1949 through August 1950 over the issue of the Chinese representation question. They [the Soviet Union] felt that the communist government in Beijing, government, and not the government in Taiwan, should represent China in the United Nations. The Soviet UN diplomats were living in New York. They were all around and even came to the UN but did not participate in the meetings of the United Nations.

When the Korean War broke out, the Security Council convened, and they [Russia's representatives] did not come. They thought that not much would be done, but the Security Council went ahead and adopted a series of resolutions on the Korean War. A legal issue arose over whether the absence of a permanent member would count as a veto. This was ruled not to be a veto, because they are obligated under provisions of the UN Charter to be at the Security Council at any time. Absence of a permanent member is not regarded as a veto by practice of the United Nations.

Question: When did you hear of your family members in Korea after the outbreak of the war

We did not have information about our own families. The ambassador's children were studying in Korea. His wife was not well, and we did not want to strain her with news that Korea was at war, because she would be too worried about her children, so I had to hide Korean newspapers from her. I learned about my family only after September 18, when the Americans had retaken Seoul. My brother was walking by the Bando Hotel, which is where the Lotte Hotel stands today. By chance, he met an American diplomat we both knew, Kurt M. Falk. My brother asked him to send a message to me that our family was safe. It came through the Embassy teletype machine. For four months I had not known.

Question: The agreement at the end of the war has been called "the most violated military armistice in modern history."

It has been violated to the point of being useless. There was a Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC), which had two nations from their side -- Poland and Czechoslovakia -- and two from among the non-Communist countries -- Sweden and Switzerland. Every time some old pieces of artillery left the country, the NNSC would allow the same number of pieces to replace them.

For example, every time a hundred soldiers were sent home, they could be replaced by a hundred fresh ones. But North Korea would not allow the non-communist observers in North Korea to leave their base. So, while we were adhering to the Armistice Agreement, they were rebuilding airfields and bringing in [Soviet] MiG fighter jets in crates for the North Korean Air Force.

I was chief of the First Section (Policy Coordination and Legal Affairs) in the Foreign Affairs Ministry in Seoul at the time of the Geneva Conference. Every day I would get a report from Geneva in the Korean language phonetically rendered using the English alphabet.

It included some code words that we had previously agreed to use. I would decode this and Chung-hwan Cho, the vice-foreign minister, would bring it to Mrs. Francesca Rhee for President Rhee. Usually, it was about two pages long. Foreign Minister Pyun was in Geneva as the chief delegate for Korea. Mrs. Rhee would say, "Is this everything This is all there is" But President Rhee would read it each day. I do not remember ever being asked to send an answering message or new instructions.

Question: Was there an expectation that the political conference would provide a solution to the Korean debacle

I would say that from the beginning we were more pessimistic than optimistic about seeing results from the Geneva Conference. We were going to meet the Communists and we were rigid in our views in those days. They had their views, and we had ours, and neither side would compromise. It was the height of the cold war.