

## Towards a New Korean Independence Movement

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February 22, 2019



*Korea Independence Movement Day, 'Samiljeol' - March 1, 1919*

March 1st of this year, Korea will celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of 삼일절, The Korean Independence Movement Day.

In 1919 Korea was suffering through the dark night of Japanese occupation. Thirty-three civic leaders, intellectuals, religious leaders, and patriots joined together in 1919 to draft a document declaring that Korea was an independent nation and not a Japanese colony. In downtown Seoul on March 1st they joined together to proclaim the document and they raised their hands and shouted Mansie, a traditional cheer meaning 10,000 years of independence for Korea. As the news of their declaration spread around Korea, it struck a chord with the people who were longing to be free Koreans. They went out into the streets and also shouted Mansie in support of the Declaration of Independence from Japan. It was one of the first non-violent demonstrations on a national scale in the world.

As might be predicted, the Japanese over lords were not happy and reacted in anything but a non-violent way. They called out the army to crush the movement arresting, beating, and shooting many people. Before the Japanese finally suppressed the movement 12 months later, approximately 2,000,000 Koreans had participated in the more than 1,500 demonstrations. About 7,000 people were killed by the Japanese police and soldiers, and 16,000 were wounded; 715 private houses, 47 churches, and 2 school buildings were destroyed by fire. Approximately 46,000 people were arrested, of whom some 10,000 were tried and convicted.

Most famous is the iconic middle school girl, 유관순 Yoo Kwan Soon who was arrested, tortured, and died in jail for participating in the demonstrations shouting Mansie.

Although the movement failed to dislodge the Japanese, it did create a mindset among the Korean people that they were indeed Koreans and not part of Japan's East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

At the end of the Second World War, Korea was liberated by the surrender of Japan but Korea's troubles were not over. The USSR accepted the Japanese surrender north of the 38th parallel while the US accepted the surrender south of the line creating two zones. After repeated failed attempts to come to an agreement on how to unify the peninsula, the US presented the case to the United Nations in 1947. The UN ordered a peninsula wide election to choose a national government. Kim Il Sung, who considered himself the only legitimate leader of all Koreans, refused to hold a joint election. With the backing of the Soviets he held his own elections in the north and guess who won?

Although the Chondogyo movement had originated in the extreme southern part of Korea as the Dong Hak Movement, the preponderance of its membership was in northern Korea by 1945, when the country

was liberated from Japanese rule. As a religious body, Chondogyo was divided with about 2,000,000 members in the north and 600,000 in the south. In north Korea, it was permitted to exist and, as the only non-Communist religious-political avenue open, attracted large numbers of anti-Communist nationalist leaders who were not adherents of the religion but approved of its nationalist, humanist, non-Communist traditions. Chondogyo in North Korea had remained true to its spiritual and nationalist principles despite strong, continuing Communist pressures.

When the UN Commission was denied access to North Korea, faithful Chondogyo members in the north, who maintained contact with their general headquarters in Seoul, requested permission to stage some sort of demonstration to dramatize their opposition to a permanent division of the nation and their insistence on national unification. After a brief period of hesitation, Chondogyo leaders in Seoul met on January 20, 1948 to plan a mass popular independence rally in North Korea, with Chondogyo members as its nucleus. The objectives were:

- (a) establishment of a unified government of all Korea;
- (b) welcoming the UN Commission to North Korea; and
- (c) disbanding of the US and Russian military governments.

The event, modeled after that of 1919, was planned to include the following declaration of purposes and three point pledge:

We are a homogenous nation backed with nearly 5,000 years of history, The complete independence of our motherland depends on

- (1) The establishment of a unified government through a self-managed general election; and
- (2) Overcoming the handicap of the 38th parallel division and establishing a unified government.

We therefore declare that we are initiating a national self- determination movement and make the following pledges:

- (1) We aim to achieve complete independence by national self-determination;
- (2) We will not give up this movement until we have established a unified government; and
- (3) We will carry out this program with nonviolence and non- resistance.

The planners of the demonstration in Seoul decided to accept the offers of two dedicated women to serve as emissaries of the Chondogyo headquarters in Seoul to carry the documents to the North Korean Chondogyo leaders. Mrs. Pak Hyon-hwa and Mrs. Yu Un-dok set off from Seoul for north Korea on February 7.

Mrs. Yu, whose husband had carefully written her message in small writing on Korean paper and hidden it in the lining of her undergarments, suffered frostbite in the mountains just above the 38th parallel. She was picked up by the North Korean authorities and reportedly executed.

Mrs. Pak succeeded in reaching Pyongyang and transmitting the directive to Chondogyo leaders. The leaders and their fellows in the top leadership of Chondogyo in the north resolved, after careful consideration, to follow the directions from Seoul and hold a mass rally on March 1st.

Unfortunately their plans were betrayed to the communist security police.

The Chondogyo leaders then changed their tactics, burning all copies of the directives from Seoul and turning the planning over to their underground organization known as the Samjae-dang. They instructed the Samjae-dang leaders to circulate instructions concerning the demonstration through their cellular organizational structure. This underground apparatus did its work thoroughly and quickly, so that all prospective participants were notified and all preparations made well in advance of March 1. About four days before the target date, however, the security police cracked down and as a result, some 10,000 Chondogyo leaders and members were arrested. All except 87 people were later released. Five of the 87 were sentenced to death and the remaining 82 given sentences of hard labor ranging from seven years to "life."

Despite the disastrous outcome in Pyongyang and other urban centers, the demonstration plans were

carried out in a number of remote sections of North Korea.

In order to protect participants still living in the north, these events were not reported in the South Korean press for ten years. It was only in 1958 that a story appeared in a South Korean newspaper detailing these events. The reporter pieced together the story from reports of Chondogyo officials in Seoul and confirmed them by talking with Mrs. Pak Hyon-hwa who had returned from the north alive.

Since learning of these events, I've asked many Korean friends about this Second Korean Independence Day Movement but have only gotten surprised and blank stares. To say that these things are not widely known would be a huge understatement.

Like the first Korean Independence Day Movement, which failed to overthrow the Japanese colonial rule, this second Movement also did not reach its objective of achieving an independent, united Korean nation. Yet the first movement in 1919 did motivate large numbers of Koreans to, at the risk of life and limb, stand up and declare that they were Koreans and not Japanese. This national self-identity runs strong in all Koreans until today. The intangible results of the second movement are less obvious but I believe they must be real. Among the North Korean people there must be a remnant of this desire for Independence and unification as expressed in the declaration and pledge that the second movement was based on. It just needs to be resurrected from the tomb of repression that it has been buried under.

The reunification of the Korean peninsula will not come from the promises of leaders shaking hands and having their pictures taken together but instead when all the people stand up together and shout Mansei. I believe that the winds of change are now blowing through North Korea based on the free markets established by the people in order to survive the famines of the 1990s. Once people began buying and selling on their own they broke the chains of dependence on the government and party. The changes are accelerating and we are going to see the power of a free thinking people unlock that prison door.

It is important now for world leaders not to impede this process. They should focus their efforts on the people of North Korea and not on the entrenched, ideologically, and self-centered motivated leaders. Only then will real lasting peace and unification come to this land of destiny.