

**RECOLLECTIONS OF MY MEETINGS WITH LEADING WORLD FIGURES**  
**BY SGI PRESIDENT DAISAKU IKEDA**  
**DR. CHOU YOUNG SEEK—KYUNG HEE UNIVERSITY FOUNDER AND CHANCELLOR**

Korea and Japan. Though two different countries, there were people in both who fought a common enemy—Japanese militarism.

In the autumn of 1943, the Japanese military government, which ruled Korea, decided to mobilize Korean students. Up until then, the Korean Peninsula had been a supply base for Japan in its invasion of the Chinese mainland. It had undergone terrible oppression and exploitation by Japanese forces. Now Korea was being commanded to make the final sacrifice: to throw its young men onto the front lines of Japan's war.

This step had not been taken earlier because many Japanese feared that it would be dangerous to arm the Koreans, whom they had so brutally oppressed. But now that the war had taken a turn for the worse, the Japanese military was forced to reconsider. Some Japanese leaders were also concerned that if most of Japan's university students were killed in battle and Korean students were spared, Koreans would end up dominating Japan's intellectual world after the war.

The Korean students, in other words, were nothing more than fresh cannon fodder to the Japanese militarists.

Meanwhile, in Japan, both Mr. Makiguchi and Mr. Toda, the first and second presidents of the Soka Gakkai, were in prison for their opposition to the Japanese military authorities, who violated the most basic of human rights. Mr. Makiguchi had spoken out with righteous anger against the enforcement of Japan's State Shinto religion on the Korean people, and decried "the arrogance of the Japanese people!"

Posters all over Korea screamed out the slogans, "Students, March Forth!" "The Emperor Commands Korea's Students!" "Now is the time for you to repay your debt to Japan!" But the truth was that Japan had taken Korea by military force, set up a puppet government, trampled on the traditional culture of the ancestors of the Korean people, and carried off its pure young women to serve as "comfort women" for Japanese soldiers at the front. What debt could the Korean people possibly owe Japan for such atrocious treatment?

In fact, it was Japan who owed a great debt to Korea. Having learned and borrowed many aspects of its own culture from its neighbor across the sea, Japan should have been making every effort to humbly repay that debt of gratitude to its great cultural mentor, Korea.

My father spent some time in Seoul, which was then called Keijo by the Japanese, before the Second World War. I was an elementary school student when he used to tell me of the terrible way we Japanese treated the Korean people. He would tremble with rage when he spoke about it.

In January 1944, 4,500 "volunteer" student soldiers were forcibly assembled, and among them was the twenty-two-year-old Choue Young Seek. They were sent to join a construction battalion in Pyongyang. Once there, Dr. Choue and around two hundred of his comrades started a "student-soldier revolution" and carried out anti-Japanese activities. Their hearts burned with a sense of justice for their cause. But the authorities discovered them. From that moment until the day of Japan's defeat—Korea's Liberation Day—Dr. Choue endured the hellish nightmare of life in prison.

In the meantime, Mr. Makiguchi had died in prison, and Mr. Toda continued his struggle there.

Fate is a mysterious thing. If Mr. Choue had not been imprisoned then, he would not be alive today. The battalion to which he had been assigned was on a transport ship headed for the Philippines when it was sunk by U.S. aircraft.

In later years, when he was building the university he founded, Dr. Choue would strip down to his undershirt and work on landscaping the grounds, planting trees and flowers and laying stones to create a beautiful campus. When building a garden, he laid heavy rocks with his bare hands. When colleagues expressed concern that Dr. Choue might hurt himself, he declared, "I am here because heaven has lent me its protection."

Dr. Choue visited Soka University in November 1997 as an honored guest of the school's annual festival. His efforts for world peace are widely known and acclaimed around the globe. It was actually Dr. Choue who was behind the idea for the United Nations to establish a U.N. International Day of Peace (the third Tuesday in September every year) and the U.N. International Year of Peace (1986). Though famous, he is very down-to-earth, warm and humble. He is a true person of peace.

I had heard that Dr. Choue's father strongly influenced his life, and I asked him about it. "I remember once in my teens, on a summer day, my father and I were walking along the road toward home when we came upon a tower of stones near the river. 'What do you think that is?' my father asked me. 'A stone tower,' I replied. 'It's not just an ordinary stone tower,' he said. 'It's a stone tower to remind you to think. You must always think: Why did I fail? How can I avoid failure in the future? A person who is always asking himself those questions will be a success in life.'"

Dr. Choue's father had struck it rich mining in Pyongan-pukto Province in northern Korea, and became a successful businessman. But before getting to that point, he had suffered two major business failures. He built the stone tower to remind himself of what he had learned through those past painful experiences.

"My father taught me," says Dr. Choue, "that there are two kinds of failure. You can just act on instinct and fail, or you can seriously think something out and fail. Though they are both failures, they have different results. It's very important in life to thoroughly think things through, to think things over patiently without haste."

I have met many of the world's first-rate leaders, and I can say from experience that they all have one thing in common: they think about the future. That may sound like a matter of course, but many, many people in leadership positions do not really think about the future; instead they leave things to chance and worry how to survive from one crisis to the next. The lesson that Dr. Choue's father taught him was a valuable treasure indeed.

We cannot possibly imagine the suffering and abuse that Dr. Choue underwent at the hands of the Japanese military during his wartime imprisonment. Even then he remembered his father's advice and engaged in deep contemplation, seeking illumination and timeless truths. "Where has humankind gone wrong? What has been our fundamental error? What should we do about it?" Dr. Choue pondered.

By asking himself these questions, he arrived at an answer: We have to create a new civilization that is neither exclusively spiritual nor exclusively materialistic, a society that combines these two aspects in an organic, creative fashion. This idea came to Dr. Choue through his life-and-death struggle with Japanese nationalism, which treated human rights as if they didn't exist. He saw that the essence of nationalism was the conviction that might makes right, a "bestial" order of the strong devouring the weak. Dr. Choue's philosophy was just the opposite, a philosophy of human dignity and respect.

After the war, Dr. Choue embarked on a long, tireless journey to spread and realize the

principles of his philosophy of human-centrism. He said to me, “The sun, the moon, human beings— nothing exists as an isolated entity. Unless we look at all things in their relationship with other things, unless we see things three-dimensionally and organically, we will never know their true nature.

“We all belong to the same human race. We live in the age of the global village. Yet we still see nations developing nuclear arsenals and chemical weapons, and buying and selling arms. For lasting peace, we must change our system of values. With a change in people’s hearts, a change in attitudes, everything will change. Even our future. We must scale back from profit-oriented economics and work to usher in a more universal democracy based on culture and humanity in which every member of the human race is equal.”

After the war, Dr. Choue’s homeland was partitioned into north and south. He thought deeply at this juncture, too, finally deciding to move to the south.

“I started in Pyongyang,” he relates, “and went from there to Wonsan, then over the Taebaek Mountains. With just a compass in my hand to guide me, I headed south, always south. My wife was pregnant, so she came later with my mother. We thought she’d be able to join me safely if she told the authorities that she was pregnant with the child of her husband in the south. But she was stopped at the 38th parallel and was told to go back. Fortunately, she ran into a friend who took her to a shelter on the American army base at Kaesong. They contacted me, and I was able to go pick her up and be together with her again at last.”

In later years Dr. Choue and his wife, Madame Oh Chung Myung, launched a campaign to reunite the some ten million families who had been separated by the partition of North and South Korea, and in 1985, family members were allowed to cross the border to visit each other for the first time in forty years.

In 1948, the year after his arrival in the south, the twenty-six-year-old Dr. Choue wrote a book titled *Democratic Freedom*. He was living in rented quarters, and his wife, their baby strapped to her back, laboriously transcribed a clean copy of the entire manuscript for submission to the publishers. In the book, Dr. Choue stated that neither the Western nor Soviet styles of democracy could achieve prosperity for all humanity, and he argued that a third, universal type of democracy was needed if this were to be accomplished. In the big, embracing heart of Dr. Choue, the Cold War was over even before it began.

But the conflict continued. The Korean War made the entire Korean Peninsula a battleground, wreaking so much destruction that it was said Korea could never recover within the century. In the midst of this tragedy, Dr. Choue’s antiwar sentiments only grew stronger, and he began calling for what he termed “the creation of a new civilized world.” He became a refugee, but as he sipped his thin corn gruel along with the other victims of the war, he rose up with determination to contribute to the reconstruction of his country. At first he thought he would pursue a political career, but eventually he decided that education was more important, that society could only be rebuilt through education.

Dr. Choue took over the running of Shinhun University (forerunner of Kyung Hee University) [where he had been teaching since its 1949 founding] in May 1951, the same month that my beloved mentor Josei Toda became second president of the Soka Gakkai. Then in 1960, he made a new start by renaming the school Kyung Hee University. It was the very year that I became third president of the Soka Gakkai.

Dr. Choue poured all of his personal wealth and every ounce of his being into building a school system dedicated to humane education. He sold the belongings he had brought with him when he moved from North Korea. How hard the challenge of construction must

have been, and what patience and endurance it must have required! Only someone who has experienced the hardships of founding a school can truly appreciate the difficulties.

In its early years, there were times when the university had a hard time paying teachers' salaries. One day before pay day Madame Oh took her diamond engagement ring to a pawnshop to exchange it for much-needed cash. The pawnshop owner turned her away, though, saying he couldn't be certain the diamond was real. It was night when she made her way home, her head filled with thoughts of what would happen to the faculty members and their families if they didn't get paid tomorrow. She was weeping so hard that she didn't see where she was going and walked smack into a telephone pole. The scar still remains on her forehead, and people call it "mother's badge of honor."

The Choues' home was old, almost beyond repair. If there was any money to be spared for renovations, Dr. Choue declared, he'd rather spend it on the university. For many years, he refused to have central heating or air conditioning installed in their home. When he had to work at home in the winter, he would wrap his legs in a blanket. His chair and all the furnishings of the house were very plain. In exchange, he was determined to make his school the best and most modern there could be.

During the Cold War, Dr. Choue, who advocated the equality of all people, was labeled pro-communist by his government and detained by the authorities. He also stood in danger of having his license as president of a college revoked by the Ministry of Education. But he remained steadfast in his convictions and determined. While building bridges of intercultural exchange on a personal level all around the world, he wrote a book called *We Too Can Be Affluent*, which influenced the government and helped lead to the "economic miracle" of South Korea.

He also expanded Kyung Hee University into a first-rate, comprehensive and unified school system with many affiliated institutions committed to providing humanistic education from kindergarten through university level. He has been a key leader of the International Association of University Presidents, and his contributions to world peace are tremendous. For decades, he has worked unceasingly for various humanitarian causes, including providing free medical care for Korean victims of the atomic bombs dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. He has been honored around world for his efforts and been called "the man who has achieved a thousand things." He believes we can accomplish anything if we try hard enough, and he believes it is imperative to try. He stands firm in the conviction that we are the ones to create humanity's future, right here and right now.

"Whatever obstacles we face," Dr. Choue says, "we mustn't despair and give up. We should think long and hard, and then move forward. That is what it means to be human. If we don't think, don't plan, and allow ourselves to be defeated by adverse circumstances, we merely descend to the level of beasts."

He continues: "I am concerned by the loss of our humanity. There is reason to fear that the twenty-first century may become a nightmarish era in which people's humanity is destroyed, where there are only two kinds of people left: those who resemble intelligent but heartless 'cyborgs' and those who behave like instinct-driven 'ape men.' I believe that both you and I, President Ikeda, are doing our very best right now to make certain that doesn't happen."

Dr. Choue's goal is a more beautiful and humane society. He has offered the idea of a "Second Renaissance" to achieve that goal. His ideas and actions have an astonishing amount in common with those of the SGI.

Our venerable neighbor Korea is home to such a wonderful individual. This is truly a

source of great fortune for Japan.

Dr. Choue believes that this is the age of the Pacific Rim. Japan, Korea and China should join together to form a regional cooperative community like the European Union (EU), he says.

With the greatest respect for his efforts, I composed a poem called “The Dawn of a New Millennium” for Dr. Choue. When he visited Soka University, he wrote to me, “My friend of one thousand years, let us redirect the course of humanity in the twenty-first century.”

There are no borders in the realm of education. At our students’ festival at Soka University, Korean and Japanese students sang the words, in the original Korean, of Dr. Choue’s “Song of Peace”:

*We're one human family in the global village*  
~  
*From unknown strangers love can make one family,*  
*Hate can turn brethren into enemies*  
~  
*Peace can never, never be obtained through conquest*  
~  
*Let us all rise up and sing, rise and sing together*  
~  
*With all our hands raised high, let us make a promise*  
*That you and I together will build peace on earth.*<sup>2</sup>

In the figures of the youth dancing and singing with bright hope-filled voices, there was not the slightest hint of nationalism. They shone not as Japanese or Koreans, but as human beings. I thought to myself, “I wish my father could have seen this.” □

1. From “The Great Chorus of Peace,” words by Choue Young Seek.
2. From the English translation of the song.