3 : A Map Changed My Life

HONG ŬLSU [HONG EUL SOO]

Teacher Turned Businessman (m) b. 1905, South Kyŏngsang Province

My father had no job when I was born. He was a Confucian scholar, a "superior man" (*sŏnbi*), so it was beneath his dignity to engage in any menial wage-earning work. In fact, you might define *sŏnbi* as a person who doesn't work. When it rains and the roof leaks, he sits there in his room with the rain pouring on his head. My father never applied for the civil service exam (*kwagŏ*) under the Chosŏn dynasty. He was a *sŏnbi* going nowhere.

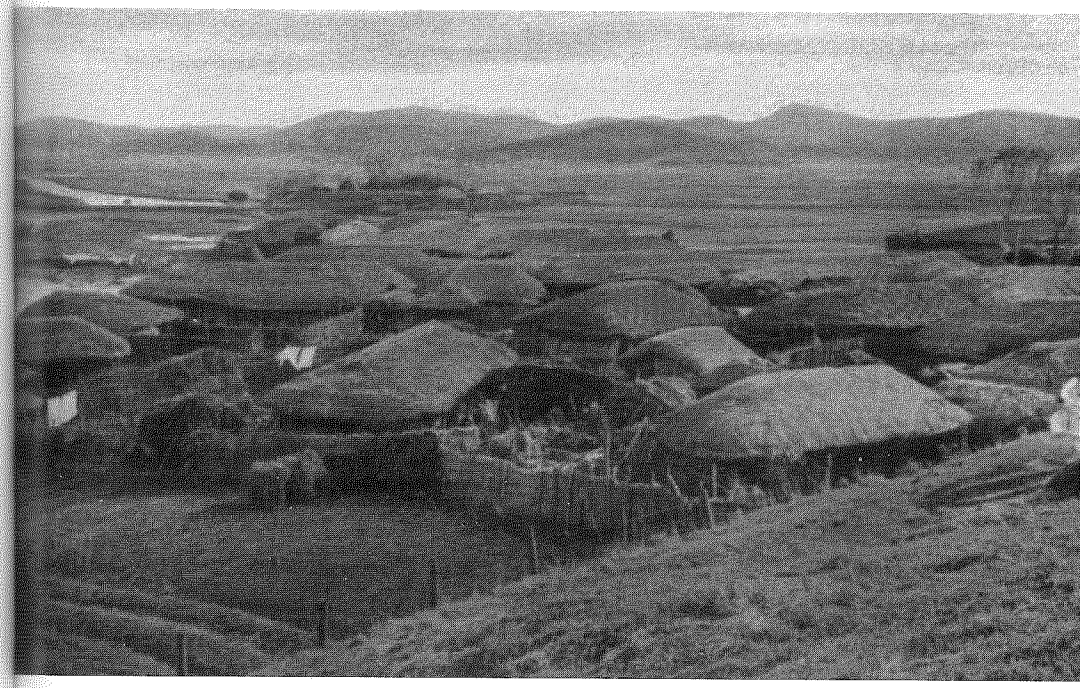
I spent the first sixteen years of my life in the small village of Waesŏk, north of Yangsan city, South Kyŏngsang Province. My grandfather had built up quite a large farm, but my father gambled away the entire inheritance and our family barely survived.

DIRT POOR

For those who barely make a living there is a phrase, "*ch'ogŭn mokp'i*," meaning grass roots and tree bark, and this is literally what we lived on. In the spring, we chopped off the previous year's growth of the pine branch and peeled off the surface layer. Inside is a sweet, oozing sap. We cut this off, drank some and dried the rest. Later we could soak it in water and rehydrate it. It has a very inviting aroma. It is called *mokp'i*, tree bark.

We also picked up acorns from the mountain in the autumn and ate them during the winter. These we had to soak for many days to get rid of the acrid smell and the caustic chemicals.

Yes, we really did live like that. Of all the households in the village, by February, only about five or six were still eating grains of any kind. We were all that poor, and our family was one of the poorest.



A typical Korean farm village of the early twentieth century. (Norman Thorpe Collection)

Our village was in such a remote mountain area that tigers roamed freely, and behind our houses we had a tiger trap. We built collapsible stone walls with a wooden column in the middle. To the column, we tied a puppy. When a tiger came to attack the puppy, the shaking pulled loose the stones and they fell on top of the tiger.

I attended the village school (*sŏdang*) until I was fifteen. Then, in 1920, I was whisked off against my will to the Japanese primary school. Here's the story.

In those days, the Korean *sŏnbi* attitude was to forbid children going to those primary schools. They said children would turn into Japanese if they went to Japanese-built schools. So you see, my grandfather and my father, both being *yangban* (upper class) and *sŏnbi*, refused to let me go to school. Besides, the Japanese required each student to cut off his long hair if he attended that school.

So, now the school is open, but the children from *yangban* families are

not attending. Obviously, this was not acceptable to the Japanese officials, so one day the county executive, the county police chief (a Japanese), the township chief, and the police branch chief all descended upon our *sŏdang* and demanded that it be closed.

They dragged all of us—literally by our long braids—to the township office courtyard. They had the hair clippers ready and proceeded to cut our hair. Right there. All of us had long hair, hanging down our backs in long braids. Then we were all sent home with no hair.

Grandfather took one look at me and went into a great rage. He yelled, "You became Japanese. Do not step inside this gate." So for three days I had to stay elsewhere. I begged Grandfather for forgiveness and he finally relented.

Because of my advanced age (I was already sixteen) and knowledge of Chinese characters, I began school as a second grader. The whole idea of primary school was so new that we felt no disgrace at beginning at such an age.

Those ten years old or younger, or those who did not know Chinese characters, entered first grade. Those who knew Chinese characters and Chinese literature began in second grade and studied only algebra and Japanese language. Third grade was for those who had finished second grade.

We had a Japanese principal and one Korean teacher—that was the entire staff. I do not believe the principal looked down on us Koreans as inferior. He was an educator, very interested in educating Koreans.

This principal had an interesting teaching method. He emphasized memorization. He taught something one day and then the next day he asked for the hands of students who had memorized the previous day's lesson. If you did this, once you got that day's lesson, you could go home. The third day, he asked for the hands of those who had memorized the previous two days, and so on. At the end of the semester, he asked for the hands of those who had memorized all four books of language and two books of arithmetic. I must tell you, I was the only one who could recite all of those six books.

A MAP CHANGED MY LIFE

The principal had a son who finished university in Japan and came to visit his father in our village. This young man was very good to the students and eager to befriend us. I remember him fondly. He kept encouraging us to study, learn, get an education. I think he felt sorry for us, we were so ignorant in this small, remote village tucked away in a southern corner of Korea.

"That's the only way you will improve your lot in life," he kept telling us. "Improve your own society, so you will come up to the level of us Japanese."

When school stopped for vacation in July of 1921, this young man told some of us, "When you have a break from farming, come and spend time with me."

Several of us did visit him. He showed us a map of the world. I had never seen a map before, and I had no idea what it was. It had such funny shapes and colors. He hung it on the wall and asked, "Do you know where Korea is on this map?"

Of course we could not answer him. Remember, I was sixteen and I had not even gone to Yangsan city, which is only eight miles away. So we were all stumped by his question. I knew of a country called China, and I knew of Russia and Japan. I thought that comprised the entire world. I had not even heard of other countries.

He pointed to a spot on the map and said, "This is Korea, and here is Japan. You are surrounded by Russia, China, and Japan. There are other countries farther away, like France, Germany, and America."

I was stunned. I was so struck by my own ignorance, I thought, How ignorant can I be? It is one thing to be a frog in a small well, but this is ridiculous. When I saw that Japan was only a little larger than Korea, it gave me confidence that if Japan could do things, then we could do them, too.

I resolved to broaden my knowledge and get an education. All thanks to that young teacher, I could no longer be content with knowing just the Chinese characters. I had to know the world.

To do that, I determined to go to Japan.

Now remember, my father and grandfather hated the Japanese, so I knew they would never give me permission to travel. Because of the new relaxed rule that began in 1920, travelers between Japan and Korea no longer needed passports, but I still did need a residence registration. I knew that Father, who now worked as town clerk, would never issue the papers, so I got them from another clerk on a day when father stayed home ill.

GOING TO JAPAN

Next I needed travel money. I knew my mother had secretly accumulated a tiny bit of money, seven yen and ninety sen, that she was saving for my marriage. [In 1920, one month living in a boarding house cost 15 yen.]

I must tell you how Mother earned that money. She left home at dawn

every morning and went into the mountains where charcoal was being prepared in a cave. She carried two charcoal bundles down from the mountain to Yangsan town to sell. She couldn't carry two bundles on her head, so she carried one bundle half way, put it down and left it, went back and got the other one. In this relay fashion, she took both bundles into Yangsan. Thirty miles round trip, so it was always late at night when she got home.

Let me tell you how brave Mother was. Because she was often out late at night, she encountered tigers three different times. Tigers, she said, when they attack human beings, paw the ground, dig up gravel and throw it at humans. Then they growl menacingly. If, when the tiger is doing this, you get frightened and start running away, it will attack and devour you. If you don't lose your composure and just walk on, however, ignoring him, the tiger will lose interest and slink away. Easier said than done—but Mother did it, three times, so she must have been a really strong person.

Now back to the money. I wanted to use it to go to Japan, so the next morning when Mother was in the kitchen working, I secretly took the money and told Mother I was going to school. I felt so guilty that I could not eat a bit of breakfast. Mother thought I was sick.

I left home and walked eighteen miles to the town of Mulgŭm to catch the train to Pusan. I bought a ticket that included the train to Pusan, the ferry between Pusan and Japan, and a train in Japan from Shimonoseki to Osaka. It cost seven yen, so now in my pocket there were only ninety sen left.

Until then, I had never laid eyes on a train. What an impressive sight! A huge, black monster. I was fascinated by how it was able to move all by itself. I took that train and arrived at the Pusan station near the harbor, and took the ship to Japan.

When I got to Japan, I boarded the lowest-class train, a freight train with only one passenger car, and arrived at the Osaka station in the middle of the night. The whole city was full of lights. Shining. Blinking. For a country hick like me, it was fascinating. Especially the neon lights that flashed red, blue, and green. I thought it was a ghost playing tricks on me.

At the station I tried to get into the third-class restroom, but it was very crowded, so I went to the one next door. It was empty—and I, in my ignorance, had no idea it was a first-class restroom.

There it was, a western-style flush toilet. I had no idea how to use that contraption. I squatted on top of the seat and my feet kept slipping off. It

was the most uncomfortable situation I had ever been in. I thought, This does not make sense. How can wealthy, civilized people use such uncomfortable equipment?

While I was struggling with this, all of a sudden the toilet flushed with a terrible rush of water! I thought I had broken something. My only thought was not to get arrested for breaking something in the restroom, so I could not even do my job, I just ran out as fast as I could. It turned out that the station periodically flushed the toilets and it just happened to be while I was struggling with it.

My clothes at the time were the Korean traditional clothes (*hanbok*). In those days, the poor farm people changed into a set of winter clothes at the end of September and wore them day and night until the following April. All during that time, they did not wash their clothes or take baths. You know that *hanbok* is white, so by spring it was almost black because of the accumulated dirt, and that is what I had on. It was January, so I had been in the same clothes for more than three months.

On my feet I wore straw sandals; I did not even know about leather shoes. So here I was, in the middle of Osaka, Japan, with dirty, smelly Korean clothes and straw sandals. No wonder people in the train would not sit next to me, with such a strong odor from my clothes.

A RURAL VILLAGE

From the station, I headed for the residence of a man from my village who lived in Osaka. I lived with this man and the man's son for three months and worked to save money to enter school. With the friend's help, we two boys got into a commercial middle school in a rural village away from Osaka city. We lived in an abandoned house, and the father, on the fifteenth of each month, sent us rice and other food.

People in the village—simple, generous folk—said to us, "You must feel very lonesome, having come so far away from your home town and being in a foreign country."

ON MY OWN IN TOKYO

Soon I moved to Tokyo, got a job delivering newspapers, and then moved on to selling a kind of snack food, a bean called *natto*. To make money to pay room and board, I had to sell fifteen packs of *nattos* each day. If I didn't sell enough, I just went without food.

Next I attended trade school, but soon gave that up and entered Ch'ungsik Middle School, a prep school oriented toward higher education.

In Japan in those days there were late-night markets, mostly run by the *yakuza*, the Japanese underground organization. I found a job as an apprentice, and this new boss was indeed a *yakuza*. He fed his workers three meals a day, and gave us ten yen a month. Most amazing, he paid the money needed for us to go to school. The first time I went to meet him, he gave me a dish full of rice. White rice. I devoured it. I said to myself, Now, I have arrived!

When I finished the apprenticeship selling books, my boss gave me a spot of my own in the market. Every month I had to pay him the whole amount that I made and out of that he gave me a salary.

I went to school during the day and worked at the market at night. By the time the market closed and we cleaned up, I got to my room after eleven o'clock at night. Finally then I could eat my supper. Next I studied until three in the morning. I slept only about three hours a day.

Soon younger boys were apprenticed to me, and I diligently taught them all I knew. For example, the way to sell books in the *yakuza* marketplace was to have a conspirator pretend to be a customer. He buys a book from you, and then makes a big noise about how great the book is, and how he can't wait to get home to read it. All the people who hear him believe him and innocently decide that they, too, need the same book.

While I worked in the late-night market, I also applied to a prestigious second-rank middle school, but they turned down my application because of the uncertainty of my income. Finally, in 1925, I settled on a third-rank middle school, and once in, I did all right, ranking either at the top or second in my class.

In that school we had four classes in each grade, labeled A, B, C, D. A Korean called Pak was in class A and I was in class B, and both of us were at the top in our respective classes. It made me very proud to have Koreans at the top of Japanese classes.

Pak also was putting himself through school, but he was always starving and behind in his payments. I lent him tuition money several times but finally had him come live with me so we could eat and work together. I figured I could work a few days more and make enough money for both of us. At first he was embarrassed, but he was so grateful he jumped up and down.

Once we moved in together, he became much more settled and happy, and could concentrate on his studies. When my *yakuza* boss found out, he

scolded me for doing this without his permission, but after the scolding, he said I was really doing a good thing and he raised my salary.

Early in 1926 I knelt before my *yakuza* boss and waited for his instructions. He said he once had ambitions, just like me, to put himself through school by working in the night market, but he failed in his studies and got stuck in the business world. "I don't want you to end up the way I did," he said. "Before it is too late, you must leave this business."

"I will never forget the kindness you have shown me," I answered him, "so please don't make me leave."

He smiled and said, "No, you must study more and get a higher education. To make it easier for you, I will set up another marketplace for you." This was an unusual kindness of this *yakuza* boss.

Also, once, a while back, I had turned down a raise he offered, and now I found that, unknown to me, he saved all that extra money every month and gave it to me now as a bank account. I was so overcome, I bowed my head to the floor many, many times. I repeated to myself my favorite motto in life, "Where there is a will there is a way."

Because of his help, I was able to drop some of my workload, and instead of working every single night I cut back to working only half the month. My living finally became comfortable.

UNIVERSITY DECISIONS

I decided to become a teacher of English, so I chose to attend Aoyama Christian University because of its excellent reputation. It was operated by missionaries and many of the faculty were Americans. I wanted to learn English from native speakers. In 1932 I graduated from Aoyama, but there are some university experiences I'd like to share.

During the first year in college I joined a study group on campus, studying communism. Over thirty students attended this group, all Japanese except for me. We got along just fine. They would hold my hand and say, "We will all work together to drive the Japanese out of your country. We are in this together."

Most of the Korean students in Japan became infatuated with communism. The Russian revolution was only a few years back, and communism was the new force. It was well organized, systematic, logically reasoned out, or so I thought, and also the Communist Party in Japan had as one of its slogans, "Independence for Korea."

I'll tell you why. The main objective of the Japanese Communist Party was to overthrow the Japanese Imperial government. They reasoned that by helping Korea become independent, Japan would lose a tremendous source of income, the government would fall, and the Communists could step in. Therefore, it was in their own interest to recruit Korean students to join with them to overthrow the Imperial government.

The Communists required you to fight for their ideology, not just study and talk, so in my second year, I became the leader of the study group and a fervent activist for the Communist ideology. We met secretly once a month to publish and distribute pamphlets. We never told each other our names or our addresses; only our uniforms indicated what university we attended. This secrecy protected each of us in case police arrested and tortured us. We could honestly say we did not know who else was in the movement.

I also became active among the Korean students at various universities in Tokyo. In early February 1929, seventeen Korean students secretly met to plan the tenth anniversary of the 1919 Korean Independence Movement. As soon as the meeting began, the police swooped down upon us and hauled us off to jail. Obviously, we had a spy somewhere within our group.

I stayed in a Tokyo prison for twenty-nine days, beginning that day in February. Very cold. Every other day they took us to the interrogation room and asked what we did, what group we joined, whom we met, who were our contacts, and the names and addresses of any others. I answered consistently, "I don't know. There are none." Then they beat me severely.

While in our cells, they did not allow us to open our mouths. No talking all day. Just sit. If we disobeyed, they beat us again. So we sat.

I had plenty of time to think. Before going to jail, I had kept busy working in the night market, going to school, studying homework, attending the reading club, and printing pamphlets. But now, in jail with nothing to do but sit all day, I began to rethink my life.

If I continued along the present course, sometime in the future I would be arrested again and put in jail for a long time. I really did not mind if I died for my convictions, but I would be shirking my responsibilities to my parents and causing my family much trouble. There is a traditional Confucian saying, "Govern yourself, manage the family, and then govern the country." I said to myself, I must first govern myself and then help out my family and my country. I thought of many questions about communism and there seemed to be no answers that satisfied me. I decided to abandon

communism. I declared to my comrades that I would no longer participate in their activities. They called me a quitter.

I was released from prison without being indicted. From then on, I concentrated on my studies and improved my grades. I graduated from Aoyama University in 1932, with a teaching credential.

In order to learn English correctly, I decided I should go to America. The faculty members, having seen a great change in me from a bothersome rabble-rouser to such a studious young man, and also knowing that I was putting myself through college, took a liking to me and said they would help me get to America.

Well, it never happened. Relations between Japan and the United States deteriorated badly, so I stayed at Aoyama and earned another degree, in theology, in 1935.

The world situation kept getting worse, so I decided to return to Korea. The American Southern Methodists helped me get a teaching position in one of their schools in Korea. They warned me to be careful—Japanese in Korea were not nearly as friendly as those in Japan itself.

I BECOME A TEACHER

I was full of emotion when stepping back on Korean soil after fourteen years in Japan. I started teaching English at the Holston Girls' High School in Kaesŏng, Kyŏnggi Province, in April 1935.

In those days, the Confucian custom of separating males and females still prevailed in many situations, and thus before I started this teaching job, they told me to be very careful as a male teacher in a classroom full of adolescent girls. They said, treat everyone equally, do not look too long in one direction so as not to arouse suspicion that you are favoring some pretty girl.

After one year, Paehwa Middle School in Seoul [founded by U.S. Methodists in 1898] asked me to join its faculty, and in the end I went down to Seoul. I was told that I would learn a lot from Mr. Yi, the vice principal at Paehwa. He was a nationalist and also a wise man. No one said outright that he was a nationalist, of course, because in those days if you said it outright, everybody would get into trouble. Mr. Yi wanted me at Paehwa because he refused to speak Japanese. Since I spoke fluent Japanese, I could be his interpreter whenever he had to meet with the government officials. I would thus be taking care of administrative details for him, and also learning how to deal with the Japanese in Korea.

Even this job did not work out for me. The police detectives' continual harassment put an end to my teaching career by the end of this second year. The High Police arrived at least once a month to check on me as part of their surveillance of politically suspect activists. This harassment gradually became more intense, until finally the police specifically told me to resign from teaching—otherwise, to get me out, they might close down the entire school. Reluctantly, I resigned and moved to Pusan.

A BUSINESSMAN

In April of 1937 I went back into business. I set up shop in Pusan and began shipping huge containers of cotton to Osaka, Japan. I was in this business until the beginning of the Second World War.

Life was good. We lived comfortably, and during that time, with the money I made, I resumed my role as eldest son. I bought a house, rice paddies and fields for my brother to expand our family's holdings so my parents and grandfather could live comfortably, and I helped my younger siblings whenever they had need. That was the least I could do to make up for taking off to Japan so many years ago with Mother's hard-earned money.

In the early 1940s, the colonial government put more and more restrictions on Koreans. If three adults wanted to get together, they had to have a permit to assemble, or else they would get hauled into jail for anti-Japanese activities. About this time, I met a newspaper reporter, and we struck up an immediate friendship. We shared frustrations over the suffering inflicted by the Japanese and, in spite of the restrictions, decided to form a secret society.

Outwardly we made it sound harmless, so we could get together without arousing suspicion. We named the society the "Thirty-sixers" because we were both that age, and we limited it to twelve members who were both our same age and had at least a high school education. As a goal, we planned to educate and sensitize others about the oppressive Japanese rule. We decided to be responsible for enlightening five people each. After a year, seven of the ten we had mentored joined our group.

To meet like this was extremely dangerous and required great secrecy and preparation. At each meeting we shared information about the domestic and war situations, the forced draft, unfair taxation, and changing names from Korean to Japanese. Then we tried to find ways to publicize all this information.

As a businessman, I knew the advantage of cultivating friendship with

people in high positions, so when I built my factory in Pusan, I befriended a policeman. This man eventually got promoted to the Japanese High Police staff as a detective with the job of watching the independence activists and radical agitators. The policeman and I got together at least once a month and I plied him with liquor and sometimes gave him money.

Once when we were eating and drinking together my friend said, laughing all the time, "You know, the secret police have a blacklist of educated Koreans and anti-Japanese activists. When the order comes, the police will round up and execute those on the list. You are on the list."

He recommended that I move to a small farm or village where nobody knew me, and sit out the duration of the war. I heeded his advice. I closed the business and bought an apple orchard in Kyŏngsan, just south of Taegu, in North Kyŏngsang Province, and moved my family there. In that county, only two Koreans had orchards as large as mine. Japanese owned all the others.

I now acted like a gentleman farmer. I told my hired workers only that I had been a businessman in Pusan and when the war came I decided to move to a rural area and become a farmer. I said nothing more about my past—prison, teaching, detectives—to anyone.

It turned out that orchard work was interesting—spraying, pruning, picking. To keep busy, I put on dirty clothes, dirty shoes, and worked right alongside my workers.

Even though we lived in the country, I read the *Asahi Shinbun*, a huge Tokyo newspaper, and I had a very good-quality radio. Through these I concluded that Japan would lose the war.

On the *Asahi* staff there was a special correspondent named Moriguchi, stationed in Berlin. He wrote articles detailing the world situation and hinted that Japan was at a great disadvantage. He never came out and said anything specific, for his writing had to pass the censorship board. But between the lines I read of Japan's eventual doom. Ordinary people might not see it, but others could draw that conclusion.

Remember my police friend in Pusan had told me about a blacklist of people who would be rounded up at the end, and killed? He was joking, I thought. But near the end of the war, that Moriguchi columnist in Berlin vanished. Just disappeared. I think he himself was on this hate list. Even a Japanese, stationed far away in Berlin for a great newspaper, was eliminated. So the list must have been real.

When I heard the news that General Tojo had resigned, I invited the "Thirty-sixers" to my orchard. We concluded that Japan was indeed losing the war to America, and we decided to form a committee to help govern Korea after the war was over. We patted ourselves on our backs for planning so far ahead.

LIBERATION

One day, I heard on my radio that the following day there would be an important announcement. I dare say, it seemed that nobody else in the Kyŏngsan area knew about it. I ran into the county chief, a Korean, and told him I was sure that the Japanese would surrender. He was dubious. "Is that so?" he asked.

I went home and listened to my radio. The Japanese Emperor came on the radio and surrendered. The war was over. We were free. *Free.* August 15, 1945.

EPILOGUE, 1945–1995

Upon hearing the news, Mr. Hong went directly to Pusan and joined with others to form a self-governing committee in hopes that when the Americans arrived, this committee would be allowed to run the province. The United States army ignored them. However, because Mr. Hong spoke English better than anyone else, the Americans asked him to work with them as interpreter and gave him "some fancy title."

The U.S. Army said Mr. Hong could take over one of the empty factory buildings left behind by the Japanese, so he restarted his cotton textile business in Pusan. He "made lots of money, then lost lots of money."

Mr. Hong joined the Rotary Club, and in 1961 he also helped found the Korean Lions Club International.

In 1970 the Korean government appointed him to a ten-person team representing business, trade, insurance, construction, and manufacturing that was sent to visit ten countries in Europe to see how Europeans conducted business. The team then made recommendations to the Korean government on how to improve the Korean business climate.

Mr. Hong left the group at the end of its tour, and went on his own to visit India, Southeast Asia, Hong Kong, and America. At retirement, he joined his children in America. He is a past president of the San Francisco Korean Senior Citizen's Association.

4 : Choosing an Education

Every family must decide if, and how, to educate its children. In Korea before the 1890s, that choice was simple, for the only school available was the male bastion *sŏdang*, village school. Here, the local boys studied Chinese writing and Confucian precepts under the guidance of a male teacher. Then, around the turn of the century, many western-style schools began to be built, and by 1910 Koreans could choose among modern schools built by Koreans, by newly arrived missionaries, or by the Japanese.

The most common school for boys continued to be the ancient *sŏdang*, which posed no threat to the new rulers, for in them students learned only time-honored Chinese classics and Confucian ideals of hierarchy and loyalty. Two of the men gave their memories of this type of school.

HONG ŬLSU [HONG EUL SOO],
(m) b. 1905, teacher, South Kyŏngsang Province:

We were so poor that we had a hard time paying our *sŏdang* master. Students took turns taking food to his house. Other than that, he got paid only once a year, after the harvest, when the parents presented him with part of the crop, mostly rice, in proportion to the family's wealth.

The Chinese text that we learned was designed by the Chinese to familiarize students with the culture of China. These texts were nothing but Chinese history, poetry, stories about warriors and artists, you name it. So, insidiously, they fostered respect for the strong foreign country and its culture [the syndrome called *sadae*], making us think that if it is foreign, from a strong country, it must be good.

In the beginning I finished my Thousand Characters (*Ch'ŏn Ja Mun*),