

Roaming Around Chǒngŭp

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“**T**he mountains and rivers, Chosŏn, the Land of Morning Calm, is the history of Korea, its poetry and spirit. Though not recorded in writing, the land itself is the most accurate, distinctive and revealing record of history. Echoes of the spirit of the Korean people and traces of their life are embedded in the land and I have no doubt that neither wind nor rain can ever wear them away.” This is a passage

from *Shim-ch'un-sun-rye*, a travelogue that poet and journalist Ch'oi Nam-sŏn (pen name Yukdang, 1890-1957) wrote 74 years ago in the spring of 1925 about his travels in the Chŏlla-do provinces.

It is true that everything has not been worn away. Fortunately, there are still numerous relics scattered here and there around the countryside which, though ruined by time or otherwise, still embody vestiges of the history of this land and its people. But

most of them lie in a distressing state of deterioration.

The sites where many relics can be found are mostly off the beaten track, in difficult to reach areas deep in mountainous terrain. But thanks to modernization, paved roads now lead into various mountains and valleys. However, these wonderful roads effectively serve as one-way streets for transporting people to the cities, while leaving their traditional customs and relics behind. When these roads



The Chŏngŭp area has many plains well suited for farming. As recently as 20 years ago, oxen such as these were used for all the heavy work, plowing the land or transporting goods. But these days, oxen have it easy, thanks to the wide use of tractors and cultivators.



The people of Tökch'ŏn-myŏn call the site where Ch'ŏn-goksa Temple once stood Saemimul, which means "village with a stream." A seven-story pagoda can be seen in the distance.



This seven-story stone pagoda (top, left) at the Ch'ŏn-goksa Temple site is National Treasure No. 309. A lotus blossom pattern is carved under its roof. Judging from its shape and form, scholars conjecture that it was built during the Koryŏ period.

This three-story stone pagoda (top, center) in a field in Ŭnsŏn-ri has been designated a national treasure. It is known to have been built in the Koryŏ period, its form showing the heavy influence of Paekche art. However, it is not known what temple stood at this site or when.

This five-story stone pagoda (top, right) at the foot of a mountain in Changmun-ri is built in a Koryŏ style.

Opposite page: The small pavilions overlooking the wide fields are the communal property of the villagers. They come here to relax or play board games.



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appeared, the few traces of history that remained began to quickly wither away, like plants deprived of sunshine. And yet, it is the presence of these roads that now makes it possible to conveniently access the historic sites and relics in the area in one quick sweep.

At the mention of Chŏngŭp, most Koreans think of Mt. Naejŏngsan and its renowned autumn scenery. Autumn at Naejŏngsan National Park offers extraordinary natural beauty. Many urbanites take a quick drive along the wide paved roads, have a quick look at the mountain's brilliant autumn leaves, and then quickly drive back home. (No! That's not quite true. At the height of autumn the roads are so crammed with cars that it's worse than rush-hour traffic in the cities.) But apart from the autumn leaves, there are many significant treasures to be seen in this part of the country, tangible traces of Korea's past. Moreover, the region is well-known as the birthplace of the Tonghak Revolt of 1894, an uprising by peasants who had suffered harshly under the tyran-

ny and despotism of corrupt government officials.

Only portions of Chŏngŭp are mountainous. The majority of Chŏngŭp is flat plains dotted with gentle hills. Villages are nestled against the hillsides and nearby are the ruins of several temples. Most of the stone Buddhas that originally stood at these temple sites have since disappeared, whereas the pagodas, which one would think would be much more fragile, remain.

There is a Korean saying: "A tower built with care doesn't fall." And indeed there are many pagodas in this region, as if to prove the truth of this proverb.

Geographically, Chŏngŭp was part of the Paekche Kingdom (18 B.C.-A.D. 660) at the time when Korea was divided into the three kingdoms of Koguryŏ, Paekche and Shilla. Thus one would expect most of the relics in the region to be of Paekche origin, but this is not the case. It has been a long time since the Paekche people lived here and most of the relics from that era have long since been destroyed. Most

of the historical relics found in the area are from the Koryŏ Dynasty (918-1392), which rose to power after the downfall of Paekche, or from the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392-1910), which superseded Koryŏ. In Pohwa-ri, however, there is a stone Buddha from Paekche. Though badly deteriorated, it has been designated National Treasure No. 914, as relics from that time are very rare. Deep in the woods of Nongso-dong, Mangjebong, there is a four-meter-tall Maiehya Buddha estimated to date from the Koryŏ Dynasty.

At the site of Ch'ŏn-goksa Temple in Tŏkch'ŏn-myŏn, there is a seven-story pagoda from the Koryŏ period standing firm overlooking the plains below. In Yŏngwon-myŏn, Ŭnsŏn-ri, there is a three-story pagoda. Both of these have been designated national treasures. In addition, there are several other pagodas remaining here and there.

Most of the Buddhist relics in Korea are not exclusively religious in their nature and function. They represent a curious mixture of Buddhism and shamanism, treated by the common

people as sacred sites for supplication to the gods. Rather than adhering closely to the original profound teachings of Buddhism, the people would simply appeal to the Buddha for the health, welfare and prosperity of their families. The region's relative wealth of relics of this kind indicates that life was abundant here, thanks to the vast fields and paddocks. In the past it was believed that a good harvest depended on help from heaven, so there was a need for places for people to appeal to the gods.

As noted by Ch'oi Nam-sŏn, Ch'ilbo-myŏn, Wonbaek-am is indeed a place where "echoes of the spirit of the Chosŏn people and traces of their life are embedded in the land." There are shamanic totems found scattered about that some people still venerate. At the entrance to the village is a pair of totem poles, *changsŭng*. Such spirit posts usually mark the boundaries of a village and stand sentinel to prevent evil spirits from entering the village, which is why their faces, though human-like, look so intimidating and fierce. But some have expressions

that are rather humorous, created in an effort to endear them to the local residents. Beside the *changsŭng*, under the *tangsŏn* tree, there is a stone phallus soaring toward heaven, evidence of phallic worship. (*Tangsŏn* refers to a place where people would gather to pray to the gods of heaven, usually nearby a zelkova tree, which became known as the *tangsŏn* tree.) This is an artifact from a time when the infant mortality rate was high and many children were needed to help work the fields. Even today there are many people who believe that praying to the phallus will help infertile couples bear children. On the third day of the first lunar month each year, the villagers still gather to offer prayers to the totem poles and the phallus. It is said that there were originally 24 *tangsŏn* around the village, but now only one remains.

At the entrance to the nearby village of Mokyok-ri are three wooden poles topped with images of flying ducks. Called *chimdŏe* or *sotdŏe*, depending on the region of the country, the purpose of these poles is dif-

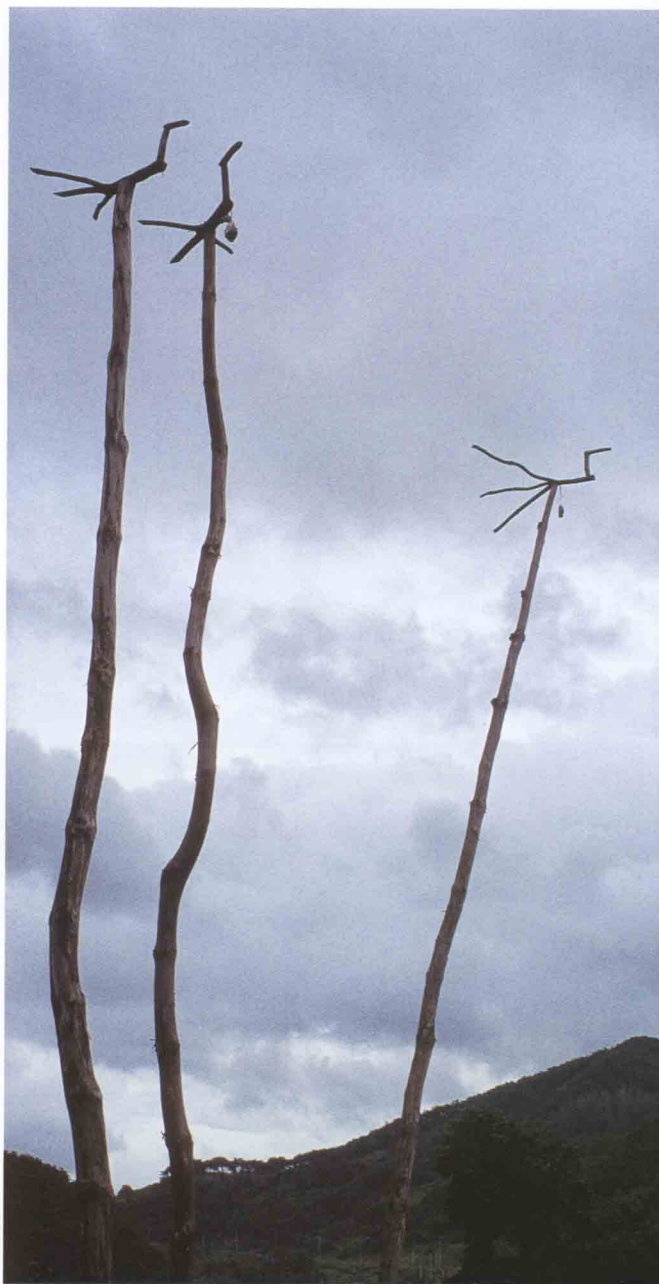


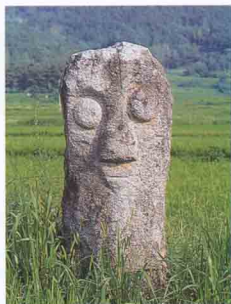
ferent from changsŭng. Whereas the changsŭng prevent evil spirits from entering the village, the ducks are there to carry evil out of the village.

Though few people today believe in these spirit posts and their original purpose, I for one am thankful that there are still some people who cling to the old customs handed down from the past.

Although central Chŏngŭp looks as nondescript as any other country town, it is still possible to find many traces of traditional agricultural society in the surrounding areas. There are a few tiled-roof houses, once owned by wealthy landowners, and a few rare examples of thatched-roof dwellings, the homes of common farming folk. Conditions have not changed that much from the past: apart from a handful of big cities, most of Korea still comprises rural communities whose residents depend on the land for their livelihood. But today, the young people have left the countryside for the big cities, for their education and then employment, leaving only the elderly to tend to the farming. As yet, industry cannot fill the gaps in farming communities created by the urban migration of young people en masse. There has been much friction and confusion as a result of changing values, which was Korea's biggest problem during its transition from an agricultural to an industrial nation.

Korea is a small country. But in the course of travel it becomes rich and wide. In many places, one can find traces of the people of the past. Following the tracks of history, even a small area such as Chŏngŭp is rich and wide. The fact that all these historical relics are the remains of our agricultural society inspires a special kind of feeling. Today, 125 years after the Tonghak Revolt and 54 years after the country's liberation from Japanese colonial rule, the summer sky still hovers over the roof of a dilapidated old pavilion built in Korea's imperial past. ♦





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Perched atop these tall wooden poles called *chimdŏ* or *sotdae*, the wooden ducks represent the wishes of the villagers that any evil spirits will be flown away by the ducks (left). Though of a primitive style, the ducks have a modern sense of beauty. One of the stone spirit posts, called *changsŭng*, mark the boundaries of temples or villages and protect them from evil spirits (top). Usually they are erected facing each other, one at either side of a road. Dilapidated and on the verge of collapse, this old pavilion seems to fittingly symbolize the demise of rural society (above).