

## Remembering Yong-ho Ch'oe, a Pioneering Historian of Korea and a Champion of Harmony between the East and the West



Yong-ho Ch'oe, Emeritus Professor in the Department of History at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, a pioneering scholar of Korean history, a devoted husband, and a loving father of two sons, died peacefully on Wednesday, May 15, 2024, in Honolulu. He was 93.

Born in 1931 in the city of Daegu in southeastern Korea during the tumultuous colonial period, Yong-ho Ch'oe grew up in a family deeply involved in the Korean independence movement, an upbringing that brought hardship but also equipped him with the capacity for hard work and a sense of duty for a greater cause.

When the Korean War broke out in 1950, Yong-ho Ch'oe enlisted in the South Korean army still as a teenager, eventually becoming an intelligence officer and serving until 1958. A part of his duty was to work with the United State military, a job that opened an opportunity for him to go to college in the United States. In 1960, he enrolled at Rockford College in Illinois and later transferred to the University of Arizona, where he completed his undergraduate education. All of his graduate education was at the University of Chicago, a place where he gained a broad perspective of humanity, having studied European history and American history, along with Asian history. He received his Ph.D. from Chicago in 1970 while he was a researcher at the Harvard East Asia Research Center.

Yong-ho Ch'oe joined the Department of History at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa in 1971, where he gifted the world with his tireless energy, excellent scholarship, and beloved collegiality for thirty years. He was a trailblazing scholar of Korean history and Korean American history, as well as an early advocate of Korean studies. With Yong-ho Ch'oe and Hugh Kang (also Emeritus) on the History faculty, the University of Hawai'i Mānoa became the first university in the United States to grant a Ph.D. in Korean history. Yong-ho Ch'oe was also a founding member of the Center for Korean Studies at the university, the oldest and largest center devoted to Korean studies outside of Korea, established in 1972. His commitment to advancing Korean studies is further reflected in his involvement in launching two seminal academic journals—first *Korean Studies* based at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, in 1975, and then *Acta Koreana* based at Keimyung University in his hometown of Daegu, in 1998.

Yong-ho Ch'oe's splendid research, represented by three books, traversed time periods and regions. His first book, published in 1987, was *The Civil Examinations and the Social Structure in Early Yi Dynasty Korea, 1392-1600*, a groundbreaking book about the society of Korea's Joseon Kingdom. Another major contribution to the field of Korean history was the monumental series *Sources of Korean Tradition, Volumes 1 and 2* (1993 and 1996) and *Sources of Korean Tradition, Volumes 1 and 2* (1997 and 2000), which he co-edited with Peter Lee and Theodore de Bary and all published by Columbia University Press. The *Sources*, which compiles and explains key historical texts, is firmly placed among the Korean studies canon. Later in his career, he wrote passionately about the history of Koreans in Hawai'i, penning *From the Land of Hibiscus: Koreans in Hawai'i, 1903-1950*, published by the University of Hawai'i Press in 2006.

In an interview with *Acta Koreana* in 2010, Yong-ho Ch'oe said the following when asked about what the East and the West should to learn from each other: “Too often in the encounters between the East and the West, the latter has exhibited its ugly inclinations, such as misconceived racism and a predatory appetite toward the former, taking advantage of its military and industrial power. But, fortunately, such a conception has fast dissipated in the last several decades. Globalization is inevitable and is here now, and regardless of

one's origin or belief, all must live together in peace and harmony with mutual respect for each other." He was a true champion of global cooperation.

As a teacher, Yong-ho Ch'oe was warm and cultivating. Many of his students went on to become respected scholars in Korean history, including Yeon-ung Kwon at Kyungpook National University, Seong-nae Pak and Byeong-yul Ban at Hanguk University of Foreign Studies, Jay Lewis at the University of Oxford, Kenneth Robinson at the International Christian University in Japan, Michael Seth at James Madison University, Brandon Palmer at Coastal Carolina University, John Duncan at UCLA, and Chizuko Allen at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

Even after retirement, in 2001, Yong-ho Ch'oe was active and engaging, regularly organizing a community forum at his apartment in Kaka'ako, where people from different backgrounds gathered to learn and discuss the pressing issues of the day. For his scholarship and dedication, Yong-ho Ch'oe received, in 2020, the Light of the Orient Award given by the Korean American Foundation of Hawai'i. In 2021, the South Korean government awarded him the Order of Civil Merit Dongbaek Medal, the third highest order of merit given by the government.



Yong-ho Ch'oe at the History Department soccer match in 1973

When asked, in 2022, to write a commemorative essay for the fiftieth anniversary of the Center for Korean Studies, Yong-ho Ch'oe did not write about the many accolades he received during his long career. No, he wrote about the time in September 1978 when he formed the Committee for Korean Rights and protested against the local media's use of the term "Korean bars" to refer to all hostess bars in Honolulu. He and the Committee demanded the media stop using the term because it was derogatory and because the hardworking people at these drinking taverns deserved dignity and respect. In late September, a local newspaper released a statement of apology and the term was never used again in the media in Hawai'i. For a person who overcame many barriers and achieved considerable success, he certainly felt that fighting for the rights and respect of the tavern workers was one of his proudest moments.

Yong-ho Ch'oe will be remembered as a person filled with kindness, generosity, humor, and courage. He was a brilliant historian, a wonderful colleague, and a champion of underrepresented peoples of Hawai'i. He is survived by his spouse, Minja Kim Ch'oe (a renowned population studies scholar), and two sons, Dan and Yun.

*Cheehyung Harrison Kim, the current Korea historian at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, contributed to this obituary.*