FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Choi Won-bok's Journey - She Gave Up Academia for Faith

Knut Holdhus
July 26, 2026

Choi Won-bok in 1973 in the USA

세계일보

Segye Ilbo

Segye Ilbo Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su

Measuring a religion by its people: The educational legacy of Choi Won-bok and the amazing life journey she chose in impoverished post-war South Korea

When religious organizations become the subject of public controversy, discussions often revolve around court cases, politics, finances, or doctrine. Much less attention is paid to another, perhaps more fundamental, question: What kind of people has the religion produced? If a religious movement has influenced generations of individuals, should its legacy not also be judged by the lives of those who were shaped by its ideals?

See also Example of 2 Unificationists in Public Service

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That is the question explored by South Korean religion journalist Jeong Seong-su (정성수) in a column published in the daily newspaper Segye Ilbo on 24th July 2026. Rather than discussing legal disputes surrounding the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (in Korea often referred to as Unificationism), Jeong turns to the life of Choi Won-bok (최원복 - 1916 - 2006), arguing that her career offers an important perspective on the movement's contribution to Korean society.

For readers outside Korea, Choi Won-bok may be an unfamiliar name. Yet within Korean educational circles, she was respected as a gifted educator, linguist, and later principal of Sunhwa Arts Middle and High School (선화예술중·고등학교), one of South Korea's best-known arts schools. During her years as principal, the school educated numerous students who later achieved distinction in music, dance, and the

performing arts, including internationally acclaimed soprano Sumi Jo (조수미).

Jeong argues that Choi's significance lies not simply in her association with the Family Federation, but in the way she embodied educational ideals throughout her life. Before becoming one of the movement's senior members, she had already established herself as a successful academic. According to the columnist, this makes her an instructive example when considering the broader cultural and educational legacy of a religious movement that is today often discussed almost exclusively in political or legal terms.

Ewha Womans University Main Entrance in 2009

Born in 1916 in Kaesong - today located in North Korea - during Japan's colonial rule over Korea, Choi displayed exceptional academic ability from an early age. She graduated with honors in English literature and later pursued advanced studies in linguistics and language education at the University of Michigan in the United States. At a time when relatively few Korean women studied abroad or held university teaching positions, she returned to Korea to become a professor of English at Ehwa Women's University (이화여대), one of the country's most prestigious institutions.

Hak Ja Han and Choi Won-bok on May 5, 1973 in Belvedere, Tarrytown, New York, USA

By every conventional measure, she appeared destined for an outstanding academic career.

Yet Jeong emphasizes that personal ambition was never the driving force behind her decisions. Throughout her youth she demonstrated a strong concern for justice and compassion for others. As a student she participated in Korea's independence movement (독립운동) [See editor's note below] against Japanese colonial rule and was imprisoned for her activism. Stories from her student years describe her quietly sharing financial awards with classmates who were struggling instead of keeping them herself.

Perhaps most revealing, according to Jeong, was her spiritual search. After graduating from university, Choi reportedly prayed for months with a simple request: that if God truly existed, He would reveal Himself personally and show her the path she should follow. The

columnist presents this as evidence that she valued truth above personal advancement or intellectual achievement.

That search eventually led her, somewhat unexpectedly, to the newly established Unification Church.

Ironically, her first visit had not been motivated by religious interest. University administrators had asked her to investigate why some students were attending meetings of the small and little-known movement. Instead of relying on rumors or second-hand reports, she chose to examine its teachings herself.

After hearing the movement's message firsthand, she reached a conclusion that would dramatically change her life.

Her decision to join the church soon created an unavoidable conflict with her university career. Ehwa Women's University required her to choose between remaining on the faculty or continuing her new religious affiliation. She could not do both.

She chose her faith and resigned from the university.

Jeong acknowledges that this decision represented a major personal sacrifice. As a respected professor with an international education, Choi enjoyed both prestige and professional security. Leaving such a position meant surrendering a promising academic career.

To be continued. Part 2 coming soon.

See also Example of 2 Unificationists in Public Service

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Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

[Editor's note: The Korean independence movement (독립운동, Dongnip Undong) was a broad struggle to free Korea from Japanese colonial rule, which lasted from 1910 to 1945. It encompassed peaceful protests, diplomatic efforts, cultural preservation, education, and armed resistance, involving Koreans both on the peninsula and throughout East Asia.

Japan formally annexed Korea in 1910, ending the Korean Empire. The colonial government imposed strict political control while promoting the assimilation of Koreans into Japanese society. Many Koreans resisted these policies by establishing schools, newspapers, and religious organizations that sought to preserve Korean language, culture, and national identity.

A defining moment came on 1st March 1919, when Korean leaders issued a Declaration of Independence, inspiring peaceful demonstrations across the country. Millions participated in what became known as the March First Movement (3·1 운동). Although the protests were largely nonviolent, Japanese authorities responded with severe repression, killing and imprisoning thousands of participants. Despite its immediate failure to achieve independence, the movement attracted international attention and strengthened Korean nationalism.

Following the March First Movement, Korean leaders established the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea in Shanghai, China. It coordinated diplomatic efforts and supported resistance activities abroad. At the same time, armed independence fighters operated in Manchuria, Siberia, and parts of China, engaging Japanese forces in a series of guerrilla campaigns. Korean independence activists also cooperated with Chinese nationalist forces and, later, with the Allied powers during the Second World War.

Japan's defeat in August 1945 brought an end to colonial rule. However, Korea was divided along the 38th parallel, with Soviet forces occupying the north and American forces the south. This temporary division eventually led to the establishment of two separate states in 1948 - the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) - making the legacy of the independence movement central to the historical identity of both countries.]

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Police Trust Shattered After Forced Confinement

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Part 2 of the Series *Dissolution Threatens the Human Rights of Believers*

Alleged Kidnapping and Confinement Ignored

Logo of the Sekai Nippo

Growing Distrust of Police Leads Woman to Hesitate Before Reporting Broken Bones

by the Religious Freedom Investigative Team of the editorial department of Sekai Nippo

See part 1 of the series: When Religious Intolerance Turns Violent

> *"The problem of kidnapping and confinement has still not been clearly and fully resolved."*

So says Tomoe Asamori (pseudonym), a woman in her fifties living in Tokyo and a member of the *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification* (formerly the Unification Church).

***Abduction for the purpose of deprogramming (faith-breaking)**: A reenactment of Yukie Kanamori (pseudonym) having been forced into a sleeping bag and abducted into a van by several men. Image provided by the person involved, partially edited.*

Twice, concerned about her religious donations and involvement with the religious organization, her parents confined her in apartments and other rooms in an attempt to force her to renounce her faith.

During one period of confinement, a pastor acting as a deprogrammer (faith-breaker) [See editor's note 1 below] – who had been directing her relatives – struck her on the head with a floor cushion. Yet what shocked Asamori most was not the violence itself, but the fact that her parents lowered their eyes and pretended not to notice as the pastor assaulted her.

Supporters of deprogramming (faith-breaking) [See editor's note 1 below] have argued that believers are under "mind control" [See editor's note 2 below], making confinement necessary as part of what they describe as "protective persuasion" or "rescue". Asamori strongly rejects that reasoning,

> "They claimed they locked me up out of parental love to persuade and save me. But if that were

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> true, why did they leave everything to the pastor and never intervene? The whole situation was completely contradictory."

Police Allegedly Assisted the Forced Deconversion

Asamori also says that police personnel assisted in her confinement.

Regarding the first incident, she explained:

> "One of my relatives knew a retired police officer. After being consulted, that former officer apparently agreed to cooperate and provided information."

She also recalls another incident that left her deeply disappointed with the police shortly before her second confinement.

One day she accidentally lost her wallet, which was turned in to a police station. When she went to retrieve it, she noticed that an officer was staring at her with what she describes as "a strange expression".

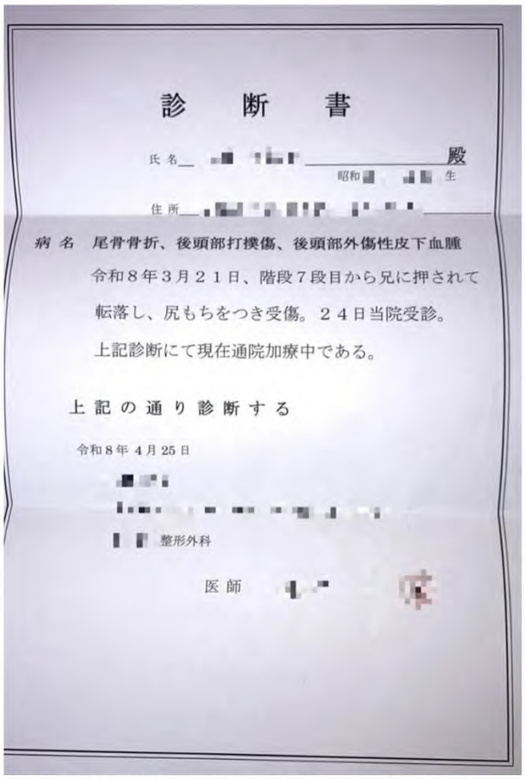
Only later did she learn why.

According to Asamori, her parents had telephoned the police station beforehand to inform officers that they intended to "take their daughter into protective custody" on a certain date and requested that the police "respond appropriately".

In other words, if she cried out from inside the apartment and neighbors called the police, officers had effectively been asked not to intervene.

Having experienced what she believes were two occasions on which police ignored her kidnapping and confinement because she belonged to the Family Federation, Asamori says she gradually came to feel that reporting such incidents would be pointless.

Even after



診　断　書

氏名＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿殿

昭和＿＿＿＿生

住所＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

病名　尾骨骨折、後頭部打撲傷、後頭部外傷性皮下血腫

令和８年３月２１日、階段７段目から兄に押されて転落し、尻もちをつき受傷。２４日当院受診。

上記診断にて現在通院加療中である。

上記の通り診断する

令和８年４月25日

＿＿＿＿＿＿

＿＿＿＿＿＿

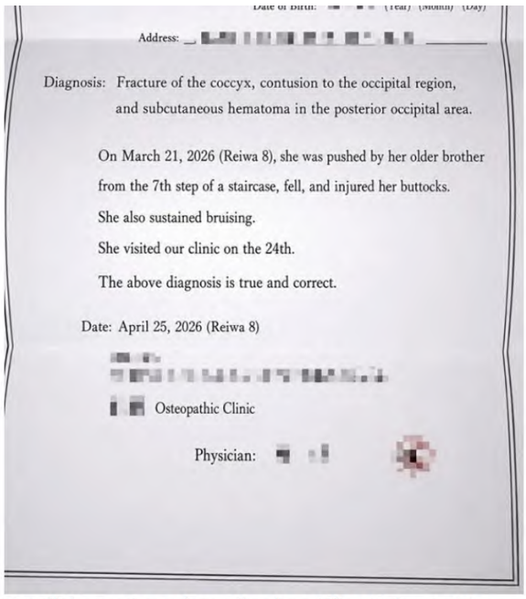
＿＿整形外科

医師　＿＿＿＿

Medical certificate issued to Tomoe Asamori (pseudonym) by an osteopathic clinic in Japan. Provided by the individual; image partially edited.

MEDICAL CERTIFICATE

Name: ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿Ms.



Date of Birth: [redacted] (Year) (Month) (Day)

Address: [redacted]

Diagnosis: Fracture of the coccyx, contusion to the occipital region, and subcutaneous hematoma in the posterior occipital area.

On March 21, 2026 (Reiwa 8), she was pushed by her older brother from the 7th step of a staircase, fell, and injured her buttocks.

She also sustained bruising.

She visited our clinic on the 24th.

The above diagnosis is true and correct.

Date: April 25, 2026 (Reiwa 8)

[redacted]

[redacted] Osteopathic Clinic

Physician: [redacted]

English version of medical certificate issued to Tomoe Asamori (pseudonym) by an osteopathic clinic in Japan in April 2026. Illustration: ChatGPT, 25th July 2026

recently suffering serious injuries – including broken bones – when her brother pushed her down a flight of stairs at her parents' home, she has hesitated to file a police report.

> "To explain what happened, I'd inevitably have to talk about my religion. And in today's climate, I don't know whose side the police would take."

She worries that there may be other Family Federation members experiencing violence behind closed doors without anyone knowing.

Sister Surprised by Brother's Violence

According to Asamori's younger sister, Natsumi (pseudonym), who was the only eyewitness to the recent incident, their brother had previously been violent not only toward her but also toward their parents.

However, she said he had never before become physically violent toward Tomoe.

> "In fact, they probably communicated better than anyone else in the family."

For that reason, she was shocked to see him assault his sister.

Natsumi also noted:

> "My sister said she could smell alcohol coming from our brother's room on the second floor. After our mother was gone, his eating habits deteriorated, and he may have become dependent on alcohol."

She grimaced as she recalled that immediately after pushing his sister down the stairs, her brother's "eyes looked like those of a demon."

Where Did the Anti-Family Federation Materials Come From?

In front of the family's Buddhist altar were books by lawyers and journalists critical of the Family Federation, along with photocopied articles.

Natsumi questioned how they came to be there.

> "Knowing my brother's personality, I doubt he would go to the trouble of printing out articles and keeping them himself."

Years earlier, their parents had attempted to force Tomoe to abandon her faith through kidnapping and confinement, and their brother had attended study sessions connected

and their brother had attended study sessions connected with those efforts.

Natsumi believes the family's names would likely have appeared on lists maintained through deprogramming (faith-breaking) [See editor's note 1 below] networks, making it entirely possible that anti-Federation materials had been sent to them.

Following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三), a flood of media criticism was directed at the Family Federation.

As Japan's *Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology* (MEXT) gathered evidence from former members and believers' relatives in preparation for seeking a dissolution order against the religious organization, the *National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales* – which can be described as having close ties to deprogrammers (faith-breakers) [See editor's note 1 below] – along with others, cooperated in collecting such evidence.

Describing her brother as "serious and meticulous, but not someone who is good at thinking independently and taking initiative," Natsumi said:

> "If someone handed him materials and explained, 'This is what the Unification Church is like,' he might simply accept it as true."

She added:

> "I'm sure my brother has feelings he can't put into words. It wasn't just prejudice against religion. I think many emotions he couldn't express built up over time until they finally exploded. Now he can't bring himself to apologize, and he's only driving himself further into a corner."

See part 1 of the series: When Religious Intolerance Turns Violent

***Featured image** above: Natsumi Asamori (pseudonym), who was present when her sister was assaulted in their family home. Photographed in Tokyo on the afternoon of the 17th by Takahide Ishii (石井孝秀)*

[***Editor's note 1*: Coercive faith-breaking** ("deprogramming") in Japan refers to the practice of coercively attempting to separate individuals from their religious affiliations or beliefs, typically through intervention by family members, professional faith-breakers (deprogrammers) or organizations hostile to new religious movements (NRMs). This phenomenon often targets members of such movements, e.g. relatively large faiths like the Family Federation or Jehovah's Witnesses, but also smaller groups like Happy Science (Kōfuku no Kagaku) and other newer religious movements.

***Also subject to faith-breaking attempts**: Members of **Soka Gakkai**. Here students belonging to the faith in 2001. Photo: Wikimedia Commons. License: CC ASA 3.0 Unp. Cropped*

However, also Soka Gakkai, a Buddhist-based lay organization with more than 8 million Japanese members, and affiliated with Nichiren Buddhism, has occasionally been subject to faith-breaking attempts.

The practice gained attention in the latter half of the 20th century, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. Parents or

concerned family members often hired faith-breakers who taught them how to abduct and forcibly detain believers. Almost all such cases involved confining the individual believer and cutting him or her off from the religious community. During the confinement, the believer was subjected to intense questioning or indoctrination designed to break his or her faith. The aim was to "rescue" the person from what the family often had been tricked by faith-breakers or lawyers to regard as harmful influence from the religious organization.

Critics of forced de-conversion argue that it violates fundamental human rights, including freedom of thought, religion, and association. Reports of psychological trauma and accusations of unlawful detention have sparked debates over its ethical and legal implications. In response, some religious groups, particularly NRMs, have lobbied for greater protections against such practices.

Japanese courts have been inconsistent in addressing cases of coercive faith-breaking. While some verdicts have condemned the practice as illegal detention, others have been more lenient, citing family concerns about "mental health" or alleged "exploitation" as mitigating factors.]

[***Editor's note 2***: In Japan, the **"mind-control" myth** has been a powerful tool used to stigmatize and suppress new religious movements (NRMs), particularly since the 1980s. The concept suggests that NRMs manipulate or "brainwash" their followers, depriving them of free will and rational thought. This narrative gained traction after the 1995 Aum Shinrikyō sarin gas attack, when public fear of dangerous cults intensified. Although Aum was an extreme and violent exception, the incident cast suspicion on all NRMs, allowing critics, media, and the government to label diverse groups as manipulative or psychologically coercive.

The "mind-control" myth serves multiple social and political functions. It simplifies complex questions of belief, making it easier to portray converts as victims rather than as individuals exercising spiritual agency. This framing justifies legal and social intervention, including the coercive "deprogramming" of believers – sometimes involving confinement or psychological pressure to force renunciation of faith. Lawyers, ex-member groups, and certain media outlets have used the idea of mind control to construct NRMs as threats to family stability and national order, reinforcing social conformity and Japan's preference for established, non-controversial religions such as Buddhism and Shinto.

In recent years, the myth resurfaced following the 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, whose attacker cited resentment toward the Family Federation. A public outrage largely created by media reignited scrutiny of NRMs, and politicians and journalists revived "mind-control" rhetoric to explain fundraising and recruitment practices. Critics argue that this framing discourages genuine religious tolerance and critical examination of Japan's restrictive religious climate. Overall, the "mind-control" myth functions less as a scientific or psychological concept and more as a moral panic – a cultural weapon used to delegitimize minority faiths and to reaffirm mainstream social norms about religion, obedience, and the boundaries of acceptable belief.]

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