FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Choi Won-bok's Educational Legacy: Character Before Achievement

Knut Holdhus
July 27, 2026

Choi Won-bok in 1975

세계일보

Segye Ilbo

Segye Ilbo Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su

Judging a Religious Legacy by the Lives It Shaped: The story of Choi Won-bok applying ideals from Unificationism to education

Continued from part 1: Scholar's Journey: She Gave Up Academia for Faith

Yet, religion correspondent Jeong Seong-su (정성수) argues in his article 24th July in the South Korean daily Segye Ilbo that an equally important fact is often overlooked: while she left the university, she did not leave education.

Instead, Choi Won-bok (최원복 - 1916 - 2006) devoted her educational abilities to new settings.

Within the Family Federation she became deeply involved in member education, teaching the movement's theology, known as the Unification Principles.

Because she spoke fluent English and Japanese, she also worked extensively in international education and missionary activities, helping translate the Unification Principles into English and contributing to communication between the movement's members around the world.

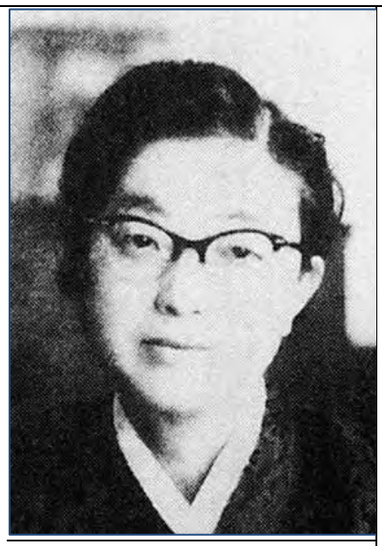
According to Jeong, these efforts helped lay part of the educational foundation for the movement's expanding international activities.

Her most visible contribution, however, came after she became principal of Sunhwa Arts Middle and High School, where she served for more than nine years between 1977 and 1987.

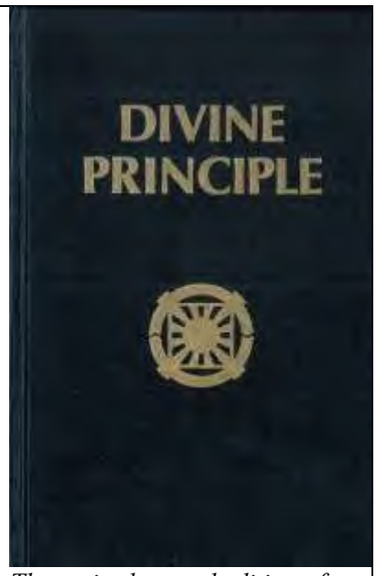
Jeong considers this stage of her life especially significant. Rather than remaining in the more prestigious

world of university education, she chose to devote herself to the education of adolescents. In his view, this demonstrates that she regarded education not merely as a profession but as a lifelong mission.

Helen Kim (김활란), president of Ehwa (Ewha) Women's University 1939-1961, including during the well-known 1954 - 1955 Ewha incident when faculty members such as Choi Won-bok and Kim Young-oon, along with several students, were dismissed or expelled over their association with the newly founded Unification Church. (1951)



Maria Park (박마리아 - 1906-1960), vice-president of Ehwa (Ewha) Women's University 1954-1960, including during the well-known 1954 - 1955 Ewha incident when faculty members such as Choi Won-bok and Kim Young-oon, along with several students, were dismissed or expelled over their association with the newly founded Unification Church



The revised second edition of Divine Principle published in 1973 that became the standard English version of the original Korean Wolli Kangron. After Sun Myung Moon and Hak Ja Han moved to USA in Dec. 1971, he commissioned Choi Won-bok to translate the Korean text into English. She did so during a 40-day period in 1972, and her text was edited by several American members before the first edition was published in early Summer of 1973 and the second edition later that year.

Many students who later achieved international recognition studied at Sunhwa during her leadership. While educational success can rarely be measured immediately, Jeong argues that the later accomplishments of these students testify to the lasting influence of the school's educational environment during those years.

Equally important, he writes, was the philosophy that guided Choi's work.

She believed schools should be places where character is formed as much as knowledge is acquired. Academic excellence was important, but it was not enough. Education, she argued, should produce people capable of maintaining integrity during hardship while also showing generosity toward others.

She often encouraged students to preserve their humanity in an increasingly technological world. Scientific and technological progress, she believed, should never come at the expense of imagination, poetry, or compassion. A truly educated person should combine professional competence with emotional depth and moral responsibility.

Her understanding of art reflected the same philosophy. Art, she said, finds its highest purpose not simply through technical brilliance or public performance but through its ability to comfort people who are suffering and bring warmth into difficult lives.

Reading also occupied an important place in her educational vision. She described books as allowing a person, even in the humblest surroundings, to learn from hundreds of great teachers. Lifelong reading, she believed, was essential for continual personal growth.

One of the concepts Jeong highlights is Choi's distinction between the "small self" and the "greater self". Human beings, she taught, should not live only for personal success or private interests. By recognizing both their relationship with God and their responsibility toward humanity, individuals discover a larger purpose that transcends self-interest. Education should therefore cultivate not only capable professionals

but also responsible citizens who contribute to society as a whole.

Jeong concludes that institutions are ultimately judged by the people they produce. Buildings may disappear and organizations may experience periods of crisis, but the lives of individuals endure as lasting evidence of the values they embraced.

Sunhwa Arts Middle and High School in Seoul, South Korea

He notes that the Family Federation is currently passing through one of the most difficult periods in its history. In such circumstances, he argues, it is worth looking beyond contemporary controversies to examine the lives of individuals who dedicated themselves to education, public service, and the development of others.

In his view, Choi Won-bok represents one such individual. Although she sacrificed an established university career because of her religious convictions, she never abandoned her commitment to educating young people. Instead, she spent the remainder of her life helping others grow intellectually, morally, and spiritually.

For Jeong, that lifelong commitment makes Choi Won-bok more than an important educator. It makes her part of what he considers one of the enduring educational legacies that the Family Federation has left to Korean society. Whether readers ultimately agree with that assessment or not, he suggests that the life of Choi Won-bok deserves to be considered as part of any balanced evaluation of the movement's historical impact.

See part 1: Scholar's Journey: She Gave Up Academia for Faith

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

Related to judging a religious legacy: At Issue: Religions Taking Reality Seriously

Also related to judging a religious legacy: Religion Between Engagement and Withdrawal

Also related to judging a religious legacy: State Failure and Non-State Peace Projects

And also related to judging a religious legacy: Unificationism Emerging as a World Religion

More, related to judging a religious legacy: Decline of Family Values Creates Social Crisis

Also related to judging a religious legacy: Essence of God

More, related to judging a religious legacy: God and Human Beings

Also related to judging a religious legacy: The Kingdom of Heaven

And also related to judging a religious legacy: True Love

More, related to judging a religious legacy: The Value of the Family

And more, related to judging a religious legacy: God's ideal

Still more, related to judging a religious legacy: God's Sorrow

Yet more, related to judging a religious legacy: Suffering of God

And yet more, related to judging a religious legacy: Family values

Also related to judging a religious legacy: Meaningful Marriage

More, related to judging a religious legacy: Living for Others

More, related to judging a religious legacy: Family as School of Love

More, related to judging a religious legacy: Parents and Children

More, related to judging a religious legacy: Teachings Make Great Strides in New Version

And more, related to judging a religious legacy: In a Nutshell

Yet more, related to judging a religious legacy: Brief about the Teachings

Still more, related to judging a religious legacy: Relationships

Even more, related to judging a religious legacy: Gender-Balanced Understanding of God and Christ

And yet more, related to judging a religious legacy: God as Our Heavenly Parent (Father and Mother)

And still more, related to judging a religious legacy: History of God: From Yahweh to Father to Parent

And even more, related to judging a religious legacy: Religious Truth as Progressive Revelation

Also related to judging a religious legacy: Essential Motherly Part of Messianic Mission

Also related to judging a religious legacy: The 3 Blessings and the Process to Fulfil Them

Also related to judging a religious legacy: Unification Principles

Scholar's Journey: She Gave Up Academia For Faith

July 26, 2026 • The News Desk

Share:

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

More Posts

Educational Legacy: Character Before Achievement

July 27, 2026

Police Trust Shattered After Forced Confinement

July 25, 2026

When Religious Intolerance Turns Violent

July 24, 2026

The Anatomy Of Japan's Hostile Media Campaign

July 23, 2026

How Media Narrative Was Changed To Attack Faith

July 22, 2026

When Giving Becomes Grounds For Dissolution

July 21, 2026

Dissolution Case:

chose in impoverished post-war South Korea

Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (정성수). Photo (2025): Segye Ilbo

When religious

The logo of the Segye Ilbo

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 part 2: Educational Legacy: Character Before Achievement

See also Example of 2 Unificationists in Public Service

See also The Gospel of Service in One Woman's Life

See also Architect of Seongnam Ilhwa's Amazing Success

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. Photo: Tlrmq / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC ASA 3.0 Unp. Cropped

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

Attorney Reveals Inside Story
July 20, 2026

Search...

Categories

Send us a message
First Name *
Last Name
Email *
Email Address
Your Message *
Submit

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.

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.

Hak Ja Han and Choi Won-bok on 5th May 1973 in Belvedere, Tarrytown, New York, USA. Photo: FFWPU. Improved resolution by Grok xAI, July 2026.

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

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.

Continued in part 2: Educational Legacy: Character Before Achievement

See also Example of 2 Unificationists in Public Service

See also The Gospel of Service in One Woman's Life

See also Architect of Seongnam Ilhwa's Amazing Success

***Text**: Knut Holdhus, editor*

***Featured image** above: Choi Won-bok in 1973 in the USA. Photo: FFWPU*

[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.]

***Related to amazing life journey of Korean academic:** At Issue: Religions Taking Reality Seriously*

Also related to amazing life journey of Korean academic:

Religion Between Engagement and Withdrawal

Also related to amazing life journey of Korean academic: State Failure and Non-State Peace Projects

And also related to amazing life journey of Korean academic: Unificationism Emerging as a World Religion

More, related to amazing life journey of Korean academic: Decline of Family Values Creates Social Crisis

Also related to amazing life journey of Korean academic: Essence of God

More, related to amazing life journey of Korean academic: God and Human Beings

Also related to amazing life journey of Korean academic: The Kingdom of Heaven

And also related to amazing life journey of Korean academic: True Love

More, related to amazing life journey of Korean academic: The Value of the Family

And more, related to amazing life journey of academic: God's ideal

Still more, related to amazing life journey of academic: God's Sorrow

Yet more, related to amazing life journey of academic: Suffering of God

And yet more, related to amazing life journey of academic: Family values

Also related to amazing life journey of academic: Meaningful Marriage

More, related to amazing life journey of academic: Living for Others

More, related to amazing life journey of academic: Family as School of Love

More, related to amazing life journey of academic: Parents and Children

More, related to amazing life journey of academic: Teachings Make Great Strides in New Version

And more, related to amazing life journey of academic: In a Nutshell

Yet more, related to amazing life journey of academic: Brief about the Teachings

Still more, related to amazing life journey of academic: Relationships

Even more, related to amazing life journey of academic: Gender-Balanced Understanding of God and Christ

And yet more, related to amazing life journey of academic: God as Our Heavenly Parent (Father and Mother)

And still more, related to amazing life journey of academic: History of God: From Yahweh to Father to Parent

And even more, related to amazing life journey of academic: Religious Truth as Progressive Revelation

Also related to amazing life journey of academic: Essential Motherly Part of Messianic Mission

Also related to amazing life journey of academic: The 3 Blessings and the Process to Fulfil Them

Also related to amazing life journey of academic:

Unification Principles

« Previous
Police Trust Shattered A...

Next
Educational Legacy: Cha... »

FAMILY FEDERATION
FOR WORLD PEACE AND UNIFICATION
EUROPE AND THE MIDDLE EAST

GET STARTED

Home Privacy Policy

SUBSCRIBE TO OUR NEWSLETTER

First Name Last Name

Your Email Addres Subscribe

I consent to have this website store my submitted information so they can respond to my inquiry

Follow us

© All rights reserved FFWPU Europe & Middle East

This Website is GDPR Ready