

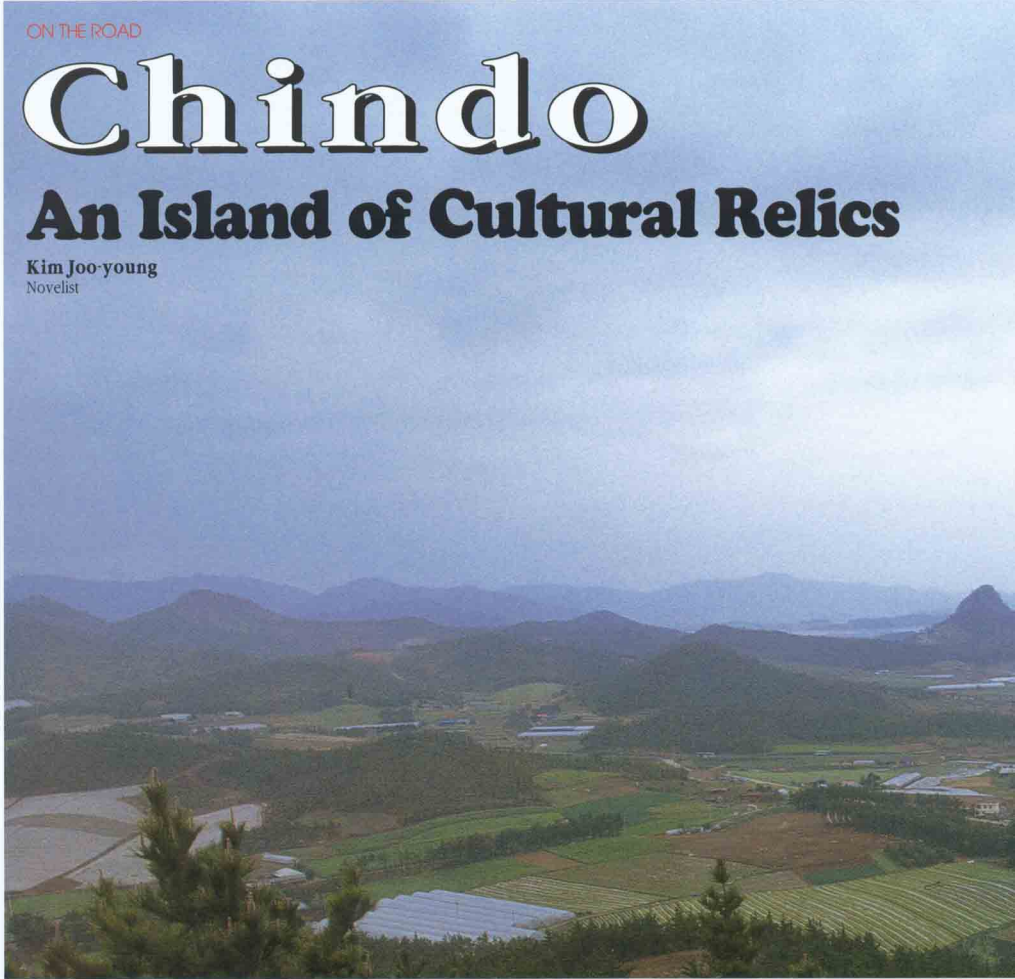
ON THE ROAD

Chindo

An Island of Cultural Relics

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“The island is situated quite far off the coast, a richly endowed piece of land measuring 50 or 60 *li* in diameter. Its mountains are tall, its waters deep. The land is fertile. Herds of grazing horses cover the fields like scraps of silk, and the orange trees grow in forests. It is a treasure trove, a paradise of fortunes, the perfect place for a southern county seat.”

So wrote Yi Suk-ham, one of the early governors of Chōllanam-do province. Chindo truly is blessed, a jewel off the southwest coast of the Korean Peninsula. The county of Chindo actually consists of several islands dotting the sea off the coast of Haenam-gun in Chōllanam-do. Because of its distance from the halls of power, the island was long used as a place of exile. Its natural wealth also meant it

played a part in many of the disturbances that have plagued Koreans throughout their history.

The island was first used as a place of exile in the mid-Koryō period when the son of Yi Cha-gyōm, a powerful courtier who sought to depose King Injong and assume the throne himself, was sent there because of his father's misdeeds. It was used for exiles more frequently during the Chosōn period.



The many insurrections and the factionalism of both the Koryŏ and Chosŏn periods resulted in the exile of many members of the royal family and well-placed aristocrats to Chindo. Some exiles later returned to serve in the central government, but many died there, often the victims of murder plots conspired at court. One record, attributed to a government inspector assigned to Chŏlla province in the mid-18th century,

sheds some light on how many people had been sent to Chindo by that time. The man petitioned the court to move the exiles elsewhere: "There are too many exiles on Chindo. The innocent island people starve trying to feed them."

Most of the exiles were well-educated members of the royal family or aristocratic households who appreciated the arts. Perhaps hoping to forget their

past glory, the exiles wrote or painted, and the local people often sang and danced to relieve the visitors' loneliness.

Chindo remains home to a rich culture of writing, calligraphy, dance and song. I attribute this to the island's history of despair and shared joy and sorrow. Although Chindo is a relatively small island, quite isolated from the mainland, it boasts some of the nation's most refined culture. Many of Korea's



finest calligraphers and painters come from Chindo. This is no coincidence.

Chindo's rich culture has also been influenced by the island's fertile soil, the islanders' sense of spiritual well-being owing to their relatively comfortable living standards, and their isolation from the mainland by the choppy seas between China and Japan. But island life was disrupted by military campaigns on numerous occasions. Most well-known are the struggle against the Mongol assault by Koryŏ's Three Elite Patrols (*Sambyŏlch'o*) in the 13th century and Chosŏn admiral Yi Sun-shin's victorious battle against Japanese invaders in the Battle of the Myŏngnyang Straits in 1597.

Chindo was invaded in 909 by the forces of Wang Kŏn, who soon united the Three Kingdoms under Koryŏ. By

occupying several strategic coastal points, Wang was able to block his enemies' communication with China and Japan and prevent their movement northward. Chindo was again strategically important when the Three Elite Patrols revolted against Koryŏ's capitulation to Mongol forces and launched their own anti-Mongol resistance in the 13th century. After the Koryŏ court reached a peace agreement with the Mongols, the Three Elite Patrols went south to Chindo to establish a permanent base of operations which included a large palace complex. They also brought the surrounding islands and adjacent coastal area under their control.

The rebels' little kingdom did not last long, however. A combined Koryŏ-Mongol assault overran the island in 1271, forcing the rebels to flee to

Chejudo Island. Some 10,000 islanders were taken prisoner, not to return to Chindo for 13 years, and the island was devastated. The islanders suffered again in 1597 when Admiral Yi Sun-shin launched a successful attack on a Japanese flotilla as it headed through the Myŏngnyang Straits on its way to the Yellow Sea.

'Mountains on the Coast'

The island is separated from Haenam on the mainland by the Myŏngnyang Straits that features rapid tides known as Ultolmok. In 1984 a bridge was built across the straits, making it much easier to reach the island. In a sense, Chindo is no longer an island, but the waters of the Myŏngnyang Straits remain as fierce as they were when Admiral Yi defeated that flotilla of 330 Japanese warships



Chindo is linked to the Korean mainland by this bridge (left). The island is most famous for the native Korean dog that bears its name (above). It is also known for hongju (upper right), an indigenous red liquor made from a native herb, and kugich'a, a tea made from the fruits of the Chinese matrimony vine (right).

with only a dozen of his own. The Ultomok rapids flow through the 300-meter-wide straits with such incredible force that even large steamships have trouble navigating the waters.

The community of Nokchin, where the Chindo Bridge meets the island, has been designated an official tourist site and is home to numerous artifacts and legends from Chindo's traditional culture and its turbulent history.

The island, Korea's third largest after Chejudo and Kōjedo, has many hills, extensions of the Ongmae sanmaek mountain range, itself a branch of the Sobaek sanmaek range which stretches down the Korean peninsula. Chindo was called Okchu, literally "fertile land," during the reign of Koryō's King Sōngjong in the late 10th century. Not surprisingly, people often say: "On

Chindo you can farm one year and not worry about food for two and a half years." The land is so fertile islanders do not need to fish the more perilous seas. Hence the island's nickname: *Haebyon sanjung*—"mountains on the coast."

The island is most famous for the native Korean dog that bears its name. The Chindo dog belongs to the medium-sized class of dogs, its average height being about 50 centimeters. Its coat may be white, yellow, black, sesame colored, tiger-striped or grey, but white and yellow are the most common. Chindo residents claim the dog is a descendant of Mongolian dogs brought to the island by Mongol invaders. Others say it is descended from a stray puppy which was raised by a wolf and cross-bred. The most plausible theory is that it is

descended from a stray puppy that washed ashore from a wrecked Chinese merchant ship.

Chindo is also known for the production of *kugich'a*, a tea made of dried Chinese matrimony vines believed to promote health and long life, which are used in wine as well. Chindo also produces a large quantity of brown seaweed, used in soups and cooking, and *chich'o*, a red herb used in the island's indigenous liquor, *hongju*, literally "red liquor."

There are many interesting historical sites on Chindo. Noteworthy among them are Yonggang Mountain Fortress and Namdo Stone Fortress.

Yonggang Mountain Fortress is located on the northeastern corner of the island, not far from the east coast facing Haenam. The fortress wraps around



Yongjangsan, a small mountain. It was the base of operations for the Three Elite Patrols during their nine months of resistance on the island. The Mongols attacked Koryŏ seven times over a period of four years before they finally defeated the Three Elite Patrols in 1271. The entire country was laid waste by their invasions. In the second lunar month of 1270, Koryŏ's King Wonjong entered into a humiliating peace agreement with the Mongols and government forces laid down their arms. The Three Elite Patrols refused to accept the peace, however, and under the leadership of General Pae Chung-sŏn, put forward Wang On, the Marquis of Sŭnghwa, as king and established a new government on Kanghwado Island.

Wary of Kanghwado's proximity to the Koryŏ capital of Kaesŏng, the rebel regime gathered its forces, including over 1,000 warships, family members



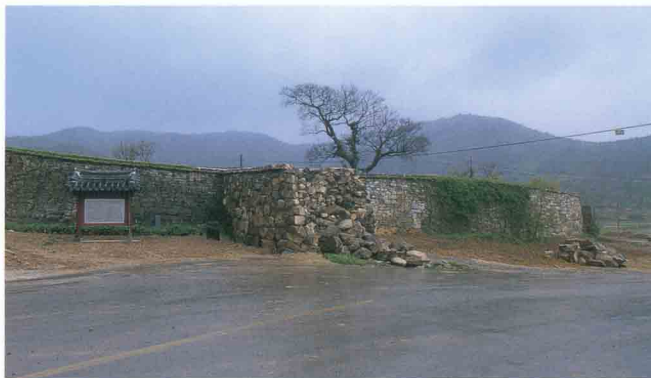
Yongjang Mountain Fortress (top) and a close-up of the wall (above)

and soldiers, and headed south to Chindo where they built the fortress at Yongjangsan. Finally, after nine months of rebel resistance, the combined Koryŏ-Mongol forces, with 400 ships and over 10,000 soldiers, launched an assault against Chindo. The battle lasted for more than 10 days, and in the end, Chindo fell and the survivors of the battle fled to Chejudo where they continued to fight for two more years. In 1273, the resistance was subjugated, after nearly four years of insurrection.

Yongjang Mountain Fortress consisted of a 13-kilometer-long fortification, most of which was built of stone, though some segments were made of earth. Much of the fortification has collapsed, but it once surrounded a vast area, and today, visitors can see two old wells and more than a dozen stone foundations where buildings once stood.

General Pae Chung-son, leader of the Three Elite Patrols during this historic period, is said to have made his last stand at Namdo Stone Fortress on the southwestern tip of the island. The fortress, which measures approximately 370 meters and has walls 2.4 meters high, remains intact, with three gates facing the south, east and west. Inside are many houses where people still live.

The stone fortress is often said to have been built by the Three Elite Patrols to defend the southwestern coast of Chindo, but more accurate historical records indicate that a fortress had first been built here during the Three Kingdoms period. Today's fortress is most likely the result of numerous reconstruction efforts over the centuries. Two bridges, Hong-gyo and Ssang-gyo, span the small creek that flows past the south gate of the fortress. The bridges are made from slabs of gneiss. Hong-gyo is one of the few bridges of its kind in Korea.



Among Chindo's other attractions are a five-story stone pagoda built in the late Koryŏ period, which stands at Kŭmgolsa Temple near Nokchin, and Ullim san-bang, the residence and studio of the Chosŏn era painter Hŏ Yu (1809-1892), renowned for his mastery of the techniques and style of the Chinese Southern School.

The Namdo Stone Fortress (above) is surprisingly intact though it dates to the 13th century. Near its south gate is a slab bridge called Hong-gyo (below).





by the Paekche tradition. It measures 54 meters in height and stands on a foundation made of four slabs of stones. Pillars and props are carved on each face of the foundation slabs.

There are three stone grottoes on Kūmgolsan. The highest one is relatively large and located on a cliff halfway up the mountain. It was built in about 1470 and has a 3.5-meter-high stone image of the Maitreya Buddha. The image is crude, but one has to wonder how anyone was able to carve anything on such a steep cliff.

Ullim sanbang was the residence and studio of Hō Yu, a leader in the promotion of the Chinese Southern School of painting in the late Chosŏn period. Hō lived here in his later years. To the west is Mt. Ch'ŏmch'alsan, to the east Ssanggyesa Temple. The sanbang is a tile-roofed structure shaped like the Korean letter ㅁ. Behind it are thatched-roof living quarters and a new exhibition hall. In the middle of the lovely pond in front of Ullim sanbang is a small artificial island made of stones on which grows a 300-year-old crape-myrtle tree transplanted to the island by Hō Yu



Kūmgolsa Temple stands at the foot of Mt. Kūmgolsan, the most prominent mountain on the island. While hardly towering, the mountain features many beautiful rock formations, and from a distance it appears to be covered with beautiful sculptures. Kūmgolsan is famous for its completely different appearance from the front and back. The five-story stone pagoda of Kūmgolsa is tall and slender, typical of Koryŏ pagodas which were influenced



Counterclockwise from top: Ullim sanbang, the residence and studio of the late Chosŏn painter Hō Yu; a scene from the Ssitkim-gut; a rock carving of the Maitreya Buddha in a grotto on Kūmgolsan; a pagoda on the grounds of Kūmgolsa Temple; Chindo's "Miracle of Moses," the parting of the seas that occurs annually at the beginning of the third lunar month

himself. Four generations of the Hō family have carried on the Southern School tradition. The sanbang was restored to its original condition by Hō Yu's grandson Hō Kōn (1907-1987).

Much of Chindo's essence is found in the songs, paintings and calligraphy of the Chindo people. It is often said that all Chindo people sing beautifully and are gifted in painting and calligraphy. Clearly, theirs is a rich culture that combines many sentiments about life and death, sadness and longing in their songs, dances and art.

The island is known for its version of the popular folk dance *Kanggang suwollae*, but also boasts a number of folk songs, such as *Chindo Arirang*, the Chindo *Field Song* and songs derived from shaman ceremonies. Today, four folk activities from Chindo enjoy the status of national Important Intangible Cultural Assets: *Kanggang suwollae*, the *Southern Field Song*, the *Ssitkim-gut* shaman exorcism, and the Chindo *Tasiraegi*, a folk play performed by pallbearers on the night before the coffin is taken to the grave site. The Chindo islanders' traditional funeral song and

drumming practices have also been designated provincial Important Intangible Cultural Assets, and more than a dozen islanders have been recognized for their mastery of these skills.

When Chindo islanders leave this world for the next, they are accompanied by a cacophony of sounds, combining vibrant drumming, song and dance. The Chindo *Ssitkim-gut* shaman exorcism is a folk ritual governing the passage from life to death. The rite combines song and dance to appease angry or resentful spirits so that they may enjoy a gentle and easy passage to paradise. The *Ssitkim-gut* provides the living and dead with an opportunity to meet and solve unresolved differences. Modern Chindo islanders still believe that the foremost act of filial piety is the performance of this rite on the occasion of a parent's death.

Every year at the beginning of the third lunar month, when a calm day foretells a bountiful harvest and a windy day portends a bad harvest, the waters stretching between Hoedongni of Kogun-myōn and Modori of Ūshin-myōn separate at low tide in what is

known as Chindo's own "Miracle of Moses." The event attracts tourists from around the country. As the sea separates, a sandy bank, 40 meters across, emerges. The temporary land bridge is called *Yōngdūngsal*. No sooner does it appear than a stream of people, bundled in bright winter jackets for the wait at the village of Hoedong, start walking onto the sandy spit. In a matter of moments, *Yōngdūngsal* is transformed into a colorful human bridge. Some people start dashing into the water before the bridge has appeared, and there are always plenty of people eager to catch stranded sea creatures. The event is also the occasion for the lively *Yōngdūng Festival*, the venue for the performance of many local dances and songs, including the rarely performed *Yongwangje* and *Ppong Grandmother Rite*.

The island of Chindo remains alive with enthusiasm and a respect for the spirits. Whenever I watch the islanders perform a traditional song or dance, I find myself bobbing with the music, filled with the kind of warm glow that comes from drinking Korea's domestic rice wine, *makkōlli*. ♦

