*“Go-un” Choi Chi-won’s Pungryu*

Korea’s “Flowing Like the Wind” Cultural Theme

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“*Go-un*” *Choi Chi-won*[[1]](#footnote-1) (857-?), the key ancestral figure of the august Choi family with its roots in Gyeongju, Korea’s greatest ancient capital, was a noted Korean government official, philosopher, poet, scholar, writer and spiritual sage of the end of the Unified Shilla Dynasty (668-935 CE). He remains one of the world’s favorite figures of all Korea’s cultural history, displaying a plentitude of national virtues and talents, and also symbolizing many key themes. Exemplifying the spirit of the Shilla Kingdom’s waning days, and the incipient harmony among Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism, he is altogether a general “culture hero” of Korean tradition.

He was a brilliant student and then scholar-official who studied for six years in the Chinese capital, passed the Tang Dynasty’s imperial examination, and rose to high office there before assisting in the defeat of a major rebellion. He then returned to Shilla, where he made ultimately futile attempts to reform the governmental apparatus of a declining and corrupt royal government there. Becoming a wandering Daoist adept in the deep mountains, he transformed into a legendary sage, with many tales told about him and many classic writings left behind.

He is honored today as the effective progenitor of the Gyeongju Choi Clan, which has produced so many illustrious figures in the 1100 years after him. He has been proclaimed to be a “great sage” since the 11th century and is still called that today, and he is already rather casually referred to by the title “the ancient sage” in the main history of early Korean culture written around 1280.[[2]](#footnote-2) When western scholars such as the early protestant missionaries first began to study the history of Korean thought, he was one of the first great persons to be researched and written about in the first journals of Korean Studies, already hailed as the ‘father of Korean literature.’[[3]](#footnote-3) One of the leading contemporary scholars of Korean religions calls him “the most significant Confucian scholar of the Shilla period.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Choi Chi-won is primarily known to Koreans and international scholars by the literary / scholar appellation (pen-name) *Go-un* which means “Lone Cloud”, with the implication of “lonely” along with solitary. This is believed to be a reference to the youthful loneliness he expressed while living in China far from his family, and also to traveling without companions around the southern part of the nation near the end of his life, just drifting like a wind-swept cloud in a mood of regretful despair over the ongoing collapse of his native kingdom. He is sometimes known by the similar appellation *Hae-un* which means “Sea Cloud,” due to his strong association with Haeundae beach in Busan.

He remains to us today as one of Korea’s most interesting and iconic historical figures, who ranked as one of the primary luminaries of traditional Korean culture, particularly its Daoist traditions known by such native terms as *Seondo* and the *Shinseon-sasang*.[[5]](#footnote-5) He is considered to be a successor of the early “Four Immortals of the Shilla Kingdom” and the great Korean Daoist master Kim Ga-gi who taught near Xian, China.

Choi is regarded as one of the progenitors of all Korean literature, especially skilled in composing historical, biographical, diplomatic and government-policy essays, and in classical poetry. The famous late-Joseon scholar “Dasan” Jeong Yak-yong[[6]](#footnote-6) proclaimed him to be one of the three best writers of Korean literature’s first millennium, the Shilla Kingdom and Goryeo Dynasty eras (the other two were Confucian Prime Minister Yi Gyu-bo and Buddhist National Master Cheonjaek[[7]](#footnote-7)). He served both the Tang and Shilla dynasties as magistrate of important local areas and as an official composer of government proclamations.

In addition, Master Go-un is credited by *Seondo* [Korean Daoism] adherents and other cultural nationalists with discovering the "original version" of the *Cheonbu-gyeong*[[8]](#footnote-8) carved on a cliff or stone monument at a holy mountain now in North Korea, and translating it into classical Chinese characters. He thereby is credited with producing the version of it that is today regarded as the fundamental yet brief Korean Daoist sacred-text, obscure in meaning but mainly interpreted as a cosmological, spiritual-practice and/or healing treatise in the same tradition as China's ancient I Ching [Classic of Changes]; and yet uniquely Korean.

Following a remarkably successful career as a brilliant, honest and dedicated Confucian government official in Tang China and then back in his native Gyeongju, Choi Chi-won is considered to be one of only a handful of Koreans who achieved the highest level of Daoist sage-hood during the Three Kingdoms and Unified Shilla eras. He is held by religious tradition, popular opinion and old folktales to have achieved *shinseon*[[9]](#footnote-9) status at the peak of Mt. Gaya-san rather than dying as a normal human, and therefore during the 20th century recountings of Korea’s cultural history the dates of his life have generally been written as “(857-?)” to indicate that we just don’t know any certain facts about the date or circumstances of his death – and that some people don’t believe that he “died” at all.

Choi was awarded the highest possible honors by the next thousand years of dynastic rulers, throughout the Goryeo and Joseon dynasties. Statues and other relics of him are still enshrined in several places in China, and he is even honored by Japanese cultural traditionalists.

Today, there are many sites all around South Korea that claim association with him, asserting that he was present there at some point and perhaps accomplished some spiritual attainment, wrote a poem or so-on. He is known to have left Chinese characters in his calligraphy carved on rocks and cliffs in various places, and to have authored the inscriptions on a few *biseok* stone steles at temples in the mountains, four of which still survive.

Records about his actual biography and accomplishments more than 1000 years ago are only fragmentary however, found in various documents surviving from both China and Korea, and in some cases appear to contradict each other. It has been difficult for scholars to separate the folklore myths and legends about his life from the solid facts, and make a coherent story out of them. There are nearly one-hundred associated tourist and cultural sites found around South Korea that exemplify his legacy. These many sites associated with him are now utilized as attractive cultural tourist sites, mainly for Koreans; they could be promoted for attraction of international visitors.



In particular, Choi is credited with the first-known usage of the concept-term “*pungryu*”,[[10]](#footnote-10) which has become a basic and essential idea in all discussions of Korean culture, especially those about the traditional performing arts. He cited it as Korea’s characteristic blending of the “Three Doctrines” of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism on the basis of indigenous spiritual culture, “so as to transform the people into sages,” offering a way of self-cultivation that emphasized seeking natural yet tasteful beauty as context for pleasurable song and dance, as a pathway towards vitality infused with wisdom.

*Pungryu-do*[[11]](#footnote-11)or the “Way of Flowing like the Wind” incorporates ideas such as living within and in harmony with nature; enjoying and being skilled at music, singing, dancing, painting, poetry and calligraphy; being merry and free from worldly cares yet retaining elegance and dignity. It is strongly related to the more aesthetic and spiritual, but less martial, aspects of the *Hwarang-do*[[12]](#footnote-12) of the ancient Shilla Kingdom, which also encompassed the enjoyment of activities that combine the elements of nature, vitality and art. It is a practical and aspirational pathway to transcend material and secular desires towards developing a healthy body, a tranquil mind and enlightened freedom within the cosmic absolute. Today, *pungryu* is also a term for traditional ensemble-chamber music and dance compositions and performances, one of the best representations of the elegant aristocratic philosophy of the pre-modern Korean society.

In the section on King Jinheung in the Samguk Sagi,[[13]](#footnote-13) in discussing developments of the Hwarang Corps and their ideology / customs,[[14]](#footnote-14) Choi Chi-won is introduced as writing in his “Preface to the Stele of Hwarang Leader Nallang” (the *Nallang-biseok*, no longer extant; nothing else is known about Mr. Nallang):

“Our country has a wonderful mysterious *dao* (tradition, principle, way; 道) called *pungryu*,

which is profound and sublime.

Its source is described in detail in the *Seonsa*.[[15]](#footnote-15)

In fact it combines the Three Doctrines

(Confucianism, Daoism & Buddhism),

and grafts them together

so as to transform the people into sages.

To practice filial piety within the family

and loyalty to the nation outside

was taught by Confucius.

To practice non-action[[16]](#footnote-16) and instruction-without-words

was taught by Lao-tzu.

To practice good deeds and avoid all evil

(thus improving karma towards enlightenment)

was taught by the Buddha.”

This is the first known mention of the term ***pungryu*** [風流; wind-flowing; also spelled pungnyu], and the only time it is used in the *Samguk Sagi* (it does not appear of all in the Samguk Yusa or any pre-Goryeo writings). Choi apparently coined this term to mean “refined, elegant, noble tastes” (especially in music, singing & dancing) as a unique aspect of Shilla culture practiced by the elite Hwarang soldier-leaders, and then handed down as an indigenous Korean cultural factor that integrates the three imported Chinese religions in a way that preserves native spiritual practices – beyond mere animistic shamanism. In this phrase “the flowing of the wind” or “flowing like the wind”, it is important to understand the deep and broad meaning of the initial character 風/풍/*pung*. Beyond its common meaning “wind” it can also, in usage with other characters, mean cultivation, atmosphere, mood, customs, demeanor, morality, style, manners, conduct, discipline and ‘virtue-power’. We must combine all these to comprehend that which Choi meant was flowing, or should flow.

This seems to be quite a novel idea in all of Northeast Asia back in those days; the “three teachings” of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism (and not to mention indigenous folk-shamanism) remained quite distinctly separate back in China for another 600 years or so – only well into the Ming Dynasty did Chinese intellectuals come to believe that they could be harmoniously blended as a broader humanist philosophy and the conduct of a ‘good’ lifestyle. It is possible that this statement of Choi and the Goryeo-era explications of it influenced this development in the Ming,[[17]](#footnote-17) but I have so-far found no direct evidence for that.

*Pungryu* continues to be a key concept in discussing traditional Korean culture, meaning an aesthetic expression of devotion to nature and serene naturalness, seamlessly integrating them with lifestyle and the arts; particularly in the musical arts, including dancing and singing; but especially associated with the *gayageum* and *geomungo* stringed zither instruments, which Choi is said to have been an enthusiastic master of. It is also applied to skilled and soulful classical playing of the *haegeum* fiddles, *piri* & *daegeum* flutes, and *janggo* drums.

Today, *pungryu* is also a term for traditional ensemble-chamber music and dance compositions and performances, one of the best representations of the elegant aristocratic philosophy of the pre-modern Korean society. It remains a basic and essential idea in all discussions of the older forms of Korean culture, especially those about the traditional performing arts. There are popular national repertories of what is broadly called ‘pungryu music’ (the term is also used in official designations of musical genres of local cultural heritage, such as the *Gurye Julpungnyu* and *Iri Julpungnyu*).

This concept is also very much involved in all discussions of Korea’s traditional landscape and genre paintings, traditional architecture and landscape design, and the relaxed sensual pleasures of literati retreat-garden culture with its associated customs of drinking alcohol and green tea while creating lovely poetry and enjoying witty conversation.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Choi might only have intended to describe the Hwarang corps’s combination and blending of the “Three Doctrines” of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism in their ideology and behavior, but the 1100-year legacy so-far of this brief statement has been extremely profound. It has come to be widely cited as Korea’s characteristic blending of those three religions in a balanced way on the basis of indigenous spiritual culture, offering a way of self-cultivation that emphasized seeking natural yet tasteful beauty as context for pleasurable song and dance.

Recognizing the dynamic creativity in the best of Korean thought even as he struggled to realize the highest wisdom in the imported Chinese traditions, Choi could not find the words for his profound insights of the ‘mysterious currents’ that swirl at the crossroads of these three ‘*Dao*’-religions, and that Korean culture had long manifested them. Further evidence of Choi deeply believing in this concept as it burgeoned in his mind is provided by Seoul National University senior professor of Religious Studies Keum Jang-tae, in describing the famous inscription on the *biseok* stele-monument at Jiri-san Ssanggye-sa:

“Choi Chi-won … began his eulogy of the royal mentor [*Wangsa*] Jin-gam by saying ‘The Way [*Dao*] is not far from humanity and does not differ from man to man. Therefore the young people of our nation worship both Buddhism and Confucianism. Therefore, during the Three Kingdoms period, Buddhism and Confucianism benefited our people side-by-side in harmony with the Way.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

*Pungryu-do* combines the best doctrines of those three Chinese-Korean religious traditions, such as practicing filial piety in the family and loyalty to the nation (as taught by Confucius), practice-ing non-doing and instruction-without-words (as taught by Laozi), and practicing good deeds while avoiding evil (as taught by the Buddha), and grafts them together “so as to transform the people into sages” – to educate them toward ethical behavior and eventual enlightenment. It therefore also offers a pathway to deeper spiritual experience in a context of all the best of Northeast Asian philosophical thinking of three millennia, through practices of contemplation of beauty, inner peacefulness, diligent scholarship and vibrant artistic endeavors that unify enjoyment of authentic nature with mindful self-control, towards self-cultivation into ‘sage-hood’. Choi himself is widely said to have practiced this *pungryu* on pavilions in scenic natural spots.

There were a few hardline Neo-Confucian scholars of the late Joseon period that misunderstood Choi’s *pungryu* doctrine as revealing him to be overly sympathetic to Daoism and Buddhism, not a ‘pure’ enough Confucian, but only hiding his mystical religious beliefs while faking to be a rationalist scholar like them. They denounced him for placing Daoism and Buddhism on the same level of value as their “orthodox” Confucian doctrines.[[20]](#footnote-20)

These critics did not seem to understand the great complement he was paying and contribution he was making to the entire realm of Korea’s spiritual traditions, using the ancient harmonious spirit of the Hwarang corps as a base upon which he built a practical theory that incorporated with precision and depth the best aspects of the “Three Teachings” – actually a sagely precursor of what the great founder Neo-Confucianism Zhuxi would accomplish in-full three centuries later. His ideas were based not only on a rigorous analysis of the texts of the three ancient masters Confucius, Buddha and Laozi, but on his passionate love of the enlightened wisdom contained in all of them. His attitude was ecumenical and open-minded, the very mark of a great mind, as opposed to his critics’ narrow fundamentalism; a contrast that still bedevils public affairs in our contentious modern world.

In one of his lines Sage Go-un was even critical of conventional Buddhist believers who only donated money in public for their own reputation for karmic benefit but neglected the deeper wisdom that required great struggle to obtain: “It is a simple matter to build a temple, but a difficult one to discover the *Dharma* [law, teachings, truth].” He was in search of universal Dharma, not the limited dharma of any one particular religion. And he lived in full recognition of how difficult that pilgrimage is, declaring in a few works that the only *dao* worth talking about is to realize the常道or至道 – both of which mean the higher, essential, universal, unchanging Dao – while never being satisfied with what one has already discovered in studies and practice, but always having the courage to continue climbing ever steeper slopes in one’s research towards the infinite summit: “It is like piercing a hole in a blade of dew-covered grass.”

If Choi had really wanted to devote himself to one or the other of the more otherworldly religious traditions, he certainly could have become a Buddhist or Daoist monk in his last years of wandering in Korea’s sacred mountains. Many of the Confucian scholar-officials in China and Korea did exactly that both before and after his times, and there was no authority that would have sanctioned him for doing-so. But he remained with his own true identity right to the end, not attempting any ‘escape’ into mysticism, but still hoping as a Confucian that the severe ills that he had witnessed in his era might be ameliorated through the *pungryu* spirit that he described, in an attempt to revive it towards national salvation.

In an initial summary here, it has been recently declared on Arirang Television that:

“For over 2000 years, *pungryu* has broadly influenced Korean artistry and traditional Korean beliefs. It also instilled Koreans with a strong desire to achieve peaceful coexistence with the world.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

There is even some discussion in contemporary Korean Christian theological expositions of a “Pungryu Theology” that can be developed out of Choi’s pungryu-do, seeking to reconcile traditional Christian theology with the three traditional northeast Asian religions and fit them together with modern Korean sensibilities and lifestyles. “Live One Beautiful Life, Let Nature Be (with no killing), All living beings Harmonize to become One, Be Benevolent to Everyone, Pursue Creative Liberation, and Have a Good Day Everyday!” are some of the ambitious slogans of this movement that were communicated to this author some two decades ago (source seems no longer known or available).

An official government online dictionary of Korea’s traditional musical culture offers this broader definition:

“Pungryu, according to Choi Chi-won, is an indigenous Korean perspective that encompasses foreign philosophies and religions. Practices of pungryu can be traced to principle training methods of Hwarang groups; members dwelled in the mountains and enjoyed nature, singing and dancing to train the body, purify the soul, and control the mind. Pungryu, thus, is used as a collective term indicating an aesthetic enjoyment of nature, central to traditional Korean thought. It is defined as refined and stylish recreation, intrinsic to a tasteful lifestyle, and relevant to Korean collective and individual entertainment culture.

In terms of collective leisure, Koreans have traditionally celebrated seasonal festivals such as *Seol* (lunar new year’s day), *Dano* (fifth day of fifth lunar month) and *Chuseok* (fifteenth day of eighth lunar month). By enjoying these festive occasions, people recharged by taking a break from hard work and remembering their ancestors. While pungryu played a part in seasonal festivals, it was perhaps more conducive to an individual level of leisure, entertainment, and lifestyle.

As a reflective activity, pungryu was a tool for transcending material and secular desires and developing peace of mind. Pungryu activities included enjoying nature by traveling, and singing and dancing to achieve harmony with nature.

Cultivating musical skills was seen as following *Do* (Tao in Chinese), or the Way, and pungryu outlined the underlining basic assumptions. Music was a useful tool of self-discipline to achieve a proper state of mind and cultivate culture, which by way of pungryu, could result in harmony among people, nature, and refined arts.

Later the term pungryu was associated with the Neo-Confucian ideology of the Joseon period and the philosophical stance of the ruling elite of Korea. Pungryu was deemed an important activity, and Confucian literati cultivated their distinct pungryu music culture accordingly.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Dr. Jeong Hae-young, a leading contemporary psychologist and psychotherapist in the context of Korean culture, explicates in a deeper way:

*Pungryu* is essentially a notion of living in harmony with or becoming one with nature. It refers to a lifestyle of living naturally like the way the wind blows and the flow goes, representing a harmonious way of life in tune with nature. As a philosophy aspiring towards nature and harmony, it rejects all sorts of dichotomies and embraces a variety of different thoughts and beliefs. When Buddhism, Confucianism and other non-indigenous thoughts were introduced to Korea, *Pungryu* attitudes and approaches were able to facilitate their local integration without any problem. The philosophical features of Pungryu clearly enabled Korean societies not to lean towards any particular religion or ideology, but to gain a comprehensive understanding of various spiritualities and philosophies and to strive for their successful coexistence.

*Pungryu* also refers to both aesthetic practice and a spirit of play. It is to enjoy the good things in life such as music, arts and literature while being in a naturally free and easy atmosphere. *Pungryu* encompasses everything there is about fun and enjoyment in Korean culture.

… Choi Chi-won explained it with the notion of *jeophwa-gunsaeng* [接化群生] meaning that one is to interact with every living being including animals and plants, and it is *Pungryu* that enables this. At that time, *Pungryu* was regarded as a way for Koreans to relate to others in solidarity and harmony, while disciplining the body and the spiritual state of mind. …

As a foundation for the Korean philosophy of maintaining a natural lifestyle that generates the spirit of play along with an emphasis on its meaning in art and nature, *Pungryu* is profoundly imbedded in the Korean mind. Representing a philosophy of life in harmony with nature within the national spirit of *Han* (oneness), commonly referred to as the backbone of the Korean mind, *Pungryu* has apparently led Koreans along the path to social awareness, of the need for justice and freedom. The philosophies of *Ilshim* (one mind), *Gi* (matter or vital energy), *Donghak* (eastern learning) and *Sisal* (seed) in particular are notable illustrations of such aspects of the influence of *Pungryu* throughout the centuries.[[23]](#footnote-23)

And in a typical laudatory modern-media evaluation, famed South Korean journalist Yun Sang-woo recently credited Choi Chi-won with combining “foreign-rooted ideologies of the great Confucian scholars, Buddhist masters and *Seondo* Daoist sages on the basis of ancient indigenous Shamanist belief (巫, 무) and thereby fusing and harmonizing them all to establish the pungryu ‘taste’ (unique flavor) for the first time ever.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

In conclusion, “*Go-un*” *Choi Chi-won* left a profound and long-lasting legacy in all subsequent Korean culture by his creation of the concept-term *pungryu*, and indeed *Han-guk munwha* cannot really be understood unless this ‘flowing of the wind’ factor is included.

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1. 孤雲 崔致遠, 고운 최치원. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Iryeon, pg. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jones, 1903, particularly pg. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Grayson 2002, pg. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Seondo: 仙道, 선도, Immortal Pathway or Way to Longevity. Shinseon-sasang: 神仙思想, 신선사상, Spirit-Immortals’ Ideology or Philosophy of Spiritual Longevity. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 茶山 丁若鏞, 다산 정약용, 1762-1836; one of the leading figures in Korea’s intellectual history. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 이규보, 1168–1241. 천잭국사, 13th century. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 天符經, 천부경, Celestial Amulet Scripture. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 神仙 / 仙人, 신선/선인, spirit-immortal / immortal-person; “immortality” of reputation & legacy at least, said to be of spirit and possibly with some continued corporal appearances on Earth. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 風流, 풍류, wind-flowing, sometimes also spelled *pungnyu*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 風流道, 풍류도, wind-flowing pathway; also spelled *pungnyudo*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 花郞道, 화랑도, Way of Flowering-Youth, referring to Buddhist-inspired elite warriors. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Jinheung Year 37, 576 CE; see Kim Bu-shik page 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Hwarang-do, 花郞道, 화랑도, Way of Flowering-Youth, referring to teenaged Buddhist-inspired elite warriors and cultural practitioners, a key institution in the Shilla Kingdom’s development and eventual supremacy over the three rival Korean states (including Gaya). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 仙史, Immortals’ History, thought to be a Chronicle of the Hwarang Corps, no longer extant]. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. wú-wéi, 無爲 or无为; 무위, *muwi* in Korean; literally “not-doing” or “not acting,” but really meaning acting in this world not with egoist intention but rather heart-intuitively, a primary ancient Daoist concept. “instruction-without-words” is also a key *Seon* [Chan, Zen] Buddhist idea. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For initial reference, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanyi\_teaching [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Zoh and Seo, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Keum 2000, pg. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Kang Jeong-hwa 2007, pages 199-203. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. http://www.kocw.net/home/common/contents/document/ArirangTV/AL\_04.pdf – “Pungryu, Korea's Elegant Traditional Culture.” [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. http://www.gugak.go.kr/download/data/dict\_20101124195149.PDF [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Jeong 2014, Chapter 2, “Korean Philosophy”. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Yun, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)