CHAPTER SEVEN

MUSCULAR NATIONALISM
AT THE DAWN OF THE NEW CENTURY:
SOCIAL DARWINISM AS AN IDEOLOGY
OF HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

Prologue: the Manly Spirit of Self-sacrifice and Struggle

Episode 1

Late Summer/early Autumn, 1906, Tokyo, Japan. A self-financing Waseda student sent a lengthy letter that would soon be printed in the first two issues of the monthly journal Tāegãk Hakpo, published by Korean students beginning in August–September 1906. The student, Ch’oe Namsǒn,—already mentioned in Chapter Four—was from the rich family of a Chinese medicine trader in Seoul and was seventeen according to the traditional reckoning in Korea at that time. His name would later come to symbolize both the glory of the pioneering studies of Korea’s mythology and religion, and what many disparagingly referred to as the pro-Japanese collaboration of the colonial period.

The letter was entitled ‘The Sacrificial Spirit’ (Hǒnsin-jǒk chǒngsin). Penned in an eloquent style in mixed Sino-Korean script and peppered with classical Chinese citations, it was meant to edify fellow Korean students in Tokyo on the subject of what sort of ‘right resolve’ might be most helpful for ‘displaying the real essence of the four thousand year-old spirit of Korea’. It was also meant to teach Ch’oe’s fellow students how ‘to contribute one of these days to the state, after having mastered the essence of the New World during studies abroad.’ The ‘virtues’ conducive to the ‘right resolve’ in such cases were first dutifully put forward: The ‘[ability] to rouse oneself [to action]’ (pun’gi), ‘bravery in action’ (yongwang), ‘indefatigable, indomitable [spirit shown] in trials’ (paekchǒl puryo, man-nan pulgul), and so on. This list of wishes was followed by the statement that the sacrificial spirit was the most central virtue, and the following lesson illustrated how this sacrificial spirit was displayed by Ch’oe’s heroes in history:
Who was the one who managed to revive the nation in the midst of its downfall, restore its fallen fortunes, and build a veritably great power on the Northern Continent? It was the achievement of Peter the Great, made possible by his sacrificial spirit. Who was the one who managed to restore the lands of the state divided into a myriad of small fiefdoms, to consolidate the chaotic management of state affairs, and to unify tens of petty dispersed states under the Prussian Crown? It was the achievement of Bismarck, made possible by his sacrificial spirit. Look at Christ, who was born in a little village as the son of a humble artisan, but succeeded in widely propagating [his] doctrine and saving living beings, being thus revered throughout the eternal ages! Whose force, whose achievement is this? The people of the whole world would unanimously reply that it was done by his blood shed on the cross. Look at Jeanne d’Arc, who was born in an out-of-the-way little hamlet in a remote province, as a farmer’s daughter, but rose to command armies and defeat a strong enemy, being [the figure] everybody in the country pinned their hopes upon! Whose mission, whose fiat was this? It would also be answered unanimously that [her glory] was solidified by martyrdom on the scaffold. The same is true in the cases of Luther, the great man of religion who founded the New Roman Church, and Washington, the builder of the New World who established Republican rule. One risked death in resisting the Pope of Rome, while the other was prepared to die resisting the metropolitan country. This is firm evidence that those possessing a sacrificial spirit have to undergo all sorts of ups and downs in life, having hair-breadth escapes from imminent death [at some points] in order to obtain good results in the end.

Then, after dwelling at some length on the self-sacrificial qualities of the great general Zhuge Liang (181–234); Song dynasty loyalist Wen Tianxiong (1236–1283), who was martyred by the conquering Mongols; and Ming dynasty Confucian martyr Yang Jisheng (1516–1555), who was executed for his critical attacks against the powers that be, Ch’oe proceeded to his conclusion. He concluded that the self-sacrificial spirit was the strongest force permeating, creating, and recreating the whole universe, and also the decisive factor in all human lives. ‘As soon as we utter our first cry after being born, we have to begin hostilities, fighting hard against myriads of demons of all kinds in order to acquire freedom for both body and spirit,’ and the self-sacrificial spirit is the driving force beyond this unending fight. And what should be the ultimate aim of the struggle for survival on the part of all Koreans? Ch’oe ended his contribution with a question about how long it might take before ‘we fly the sacred Korean flag above the eight regions of the world, its wind blowing in four directions, the people of all states on the five continents kneeling down before its majestic power and all living beings in the