

Social Science Mattered: Choe Munhwan and the Knowledge of Nation-Building in Early Cold War South Korea*

Seok-Won LEE

In this study, I trace the trajectory of controversial social scientist Choe Munhwan (1916–1975), revealing the intellectual dynamics of the tumultuous period of early Cold War South Korea. Choe was one of the leading sociologists/economists on South Korean nation-building in the 1950s and 1960s. Critical of the top-down direction of American social scientific notions regarding the Third World, such as Rostow’s take-off theory, Choe reread German social science theories, particularly Max Weber’s, to address Korea’s problem of “underdevelopment.” Initially trained in imperial Japan, he first contextualized Weber’s analysis of German society as a prescription for an underdeveloped Germany. He believed that the German path to modernization in the early twentieth century was more relevant to South Korean society than American social theories and introduced the history of social and economic thought to Cold War South Korean social sciences, producing numerous works. However, he also believed that adapting to Park Chung Hee’s military dictatorship was an appropriate way for a “reformed” intellectual to contribute to the modernization of an underdeveloped country such as South Korea.

Keywords: Sociology, nation-building, the Korean War, underdevelopment, Max Weber

*This research was supported by the Academy of Korean Studies under grant number AKS-2021-R-030.

Seok-Won Lee (lee@rhodes.edu) is an associate professor at the Department of History, Rhodes College