

# A Study on the Chronological Contradictions in Choi Sang-su's "Rules of Ssireum" and the Retroactive Value of Ssireum Techniques from the Japanese Colonial Period

— Cross-Validation with Historical Sources from 1940 and the Rediscovery of the Sonjabi-Type Striking Techniques —

International Northern Ssireum Federation (INSF) Traditional Wrestling Studies

Song Jun-ho

Researcher, International Northern Ssireum Federation (INSF)

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines, on an empirical basis, the chronological contradictions contained in "The Types and Rules of Korean Ssireum" by Ain (兒仁) Choi Sang-su (1918-2009), a pioneer of Korean folklore studies, and analyzes the historical retroactive value of the text. Bibliographical verification reveals a discrepancy between Choi Sang-su's birth year (1918) and the experiential periods described or cited in the work. However, this study focuses on the fact that the technical classification recorded by Choi is consistent with the 1940 source "Sports Feature" (運動欄特輯), and that the text preserves the original form of "hand-striking

techniques” that have been lost from modern Ssireum. In particular, following Hand Technique No. 5 (Under-Chin Strike) and No. 12 (Neck Press), the “Daetoe-chigi” technique of Soksa (Yanbian Ssireum), recently excavated at an academic conference jointly organized by Song Jun-ho and the Department of Physical Education of Yanbian University in 2016, is presented as evidence of the martial characteristics of Mindung-ssireum, in which the opponent’s vulnerable areas could be struck directly. Based on the biomechanical principle that a knife-hand strike to the back of the neck is more than a simple pushing action and can affect inertia and bodily reflexes, this paper argues that although Choi’s document is a late transitional text compiled in the early 1960s, its substantive technical content functions as a decisive “time capsule” through which the combative prototype of late-Joseon Mindung-ssireum can be traced retrospectively to the 1880s.

#### Author Information



##### **Song Jun-ho (송준호)**

Documenting and researching Ssireum (Northern Style) and Silk Road warrior culture, which are listed in the 2018 UNESCO Representative List.

Publishing monographs and e-books on Amazon in the U.S. and engaging in international research activities.

Keywords: Choi Sang-su; Rules of Ssireum; Mindung-ssireum; hand-striking techniques; Daetoe-chigi; Yanbian Ssireum (Soksa); folkloristic retroactive method

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional Korean Ssireum is more than a physical competition; it is an intangible cultural heritage representing communal bonds and physical culture. Before Ssireum acquired the standardized framework of modern sport, Choi Sang-su (崔常壽), a folklorist, is regarded as one of the scholars who systematically compiled the transmission patterns of Ssireum during the Japanese colonial period and the late Joseon period. In particular, his “A Study of Korean Folk Games,” published in Volume 3 of the Proceedings of the National Academy of Arts in 1964, and the expanded monograph “A Study of Korean Ssireum and Swing” (1974) are regarded as landmark works that systematized the types, rules, and techniques of traditional Ssireum.

Recently, bibliographical criticism of Choi Sang-su's early fieldwork records has become increasingly active, and serious timeline errors have also been identified throughout his Ssireum research, where his birth year and the times of purported observation do not correspond. Accordingly, this study seeks to objectively examine the nature of the chronological contradictions appearing in the Rules of Ssireum text. It further compares the mechanics of the hand techniques preserved in the text in detail with the primary source "Sports Feature" (運動欄特輯) from 1940, and cross-validates them with the actual striking technique of "Soksa (Yanbian Ssireum)" excavated through an academic conference at Yanbian University in 2016, in order to investigate the restoration of the hand-striking system characteristic of late-Joseon Mindung-ssireum and the historical retroactive potential of this text.

## 2. CHRONOLOGICAL CONTRADICTIONS IN CHOI SANG-SU'S SSIREUM RECORDS AND A HYPOTHETICAL EXPLANATION

### 2.1. Physical Conflict Between Birth Year and the Narrative

Choi Sang-su's official date of birth is December 3, 1918. When the autobiographical passages in his Rules of Ssireum are compared against this established date, serious contradictions emerge.

First, Choi Sang-su states that he witnessed the 1924 All-Korea Ssireum Tournament. At that time, however, Choi was only six years old. From a bibliographical perspective, it is difficult to regard early-childhood memory as a reliable basis for establishing scholarly rules of Ssireum.

Second, an even more decisive problem is the reference to "rural Ssireum 55 years ago." When this statement is calculated backward from the two dates at which Choi's Ssireum-related writings were published—the 1964 article and the 1974 monograph—the contradiction shown below emerges.

Choi Sang-su

Birth: December 3, 1918

Busan-bu, Gyeongsangnam-do, Korea, during the Japanese colonial period



Source: Wikipedia

Table 1. Reverse Timeline Analysis of “55 Years Ago” Based on Choi Sang-su’s Narrative

- Reverse calculation from the 1974 book:  $1974 - 55 \text{ years} = 1919$  (Choi was one year old, an infant)
- Reverse calculation from the 1964 article:  $1964 - 55 \text{ years} = 1909$  (nine years before Choi’s birth, late Korean Empire)

Even using 1974 as the reference point, the calculation leads to the conclusion that a one-year-old child observed the rules of Ssireum in a rural yard. If the first publication date, 1964, is used as the reference point, the statement becomes an account of direct observation of a period before he was even born. Thus, taken literally, the statement is clearly inconsistent with the timeline.

## 2.2. Resolving the Contradiction: The 1936 Fieldwork Draft Hypothesis and Distortion of the Narrative Subject

Rather than dismissing this bibliographical contradiction simply as “deception” or “fiction,” it is more appropriate to interpret it as a phenomenon arising from limitations in folkloristic research methodology. This paper interprets it as a “distortion of the narrative subject during the uncritical reproduction of a 1936 fieldwork draft.”

The year 1936, when Choi was 18 years old, is the period he identifies as the beginning of his fieldwork in the Yeongnam region. If the young Choi investigated

Ssireum grounds in areas such as Masan and Jinju in Gyeongsangnam-do and interviewed elderly strongmen in their seventies and eighties, born in the 1850s-1860s, it is possible to hypothesize that he recorded oral testimony concerning “the rules of rural Ssireum 55 years earlier” (1881, during the reign of King Gojong of Joseon).

The chronology becomes consistent under this hypothesis.

Later, in the early 1960s, when Choi, now an adult, combined his rough notes and drafts from the past and organized them into scholarly articles, he may not have adequately separated the informants’ oral testimony (raw data) from his own experience, or he may have failed to smooth out the chronological calculations, thereby leaving the error in the published text.

### 3. CROSS-VALIDATION WITH THE 1940 “SPORTS FEATURE” SOURCE AND TECHNICAL ANALYSIS



1940 Ssireum article, source: Chosun News Library 100 - Chosun.com

Despite Choi Sang-su's personal chronological calculation errors, the substance of the technical names and classification system he recorded provides strong evidence of factual continuity. This is demonstrated through cross-validation with the 1940 "Sports Feature" article, a primary source from the Japanese colonial period.

### 3.1. Consistency in Ssireum Types and Regional Distribution

According to the 1940 source, Kang Nak-won and Seo Sang-cheon investigated Ssireum styles throughout Korea and recorded that "Left-side Ssireum" was practiced in ten provinces, while "Right-side Ssireum" (바른씨름) was practiced in the three provinces of Gyeonggi and Jeolla, and "Belt Ssireum" (띠씨름, 네굽씨름) was practiced in parts of Chungcheong Province. This three-part classification and the description of regional distribution correspond closely with the classification system later specified by Choi Sang-su in his paper on the rules of Ssireum.

### 3.2. The Structure of the Four Basic Types and the Sonjabi-Type (型)

The technical system of Ssireum contained in Choi's document follows the four basic types recorded in the 1940 source: Baejaegi-type (型), Geori-type (型), Chige-type (型), and Sonjabi-type (型). Of particular importance is the "Sonjabi-type" technique, in which the opponent's body is directly grasped and controlled by the hands. Because this method does not rely exclusively on the Ssireum belt (satba) as an instrument and instead uses bodily contact to break the opponent's balance, the paper connects it directly with the structure of late-Joseon "Mindung-ssireum," described here as bare-body Ssireum.

### 3.3. Detailed Biomechanical Analysis of Sonjabi-Type Techniques, Mindung-ssireum, and Hamgyeong-do Soksa

While modern sport Ssireum has become established as a form of grappling in which the bodies of the competitors are connected through a fixed medium, the "Sonjabi-type" techniques preserved in the 1940 source and Choi's research materials target anatomical vulnerabilities and disruption of the opponent's balance regardless of whether a satba is used. The paper interprets these techniques as direct technical legacies of older combative practices and of late-Joseon "Mindung-ssireum."

피와 준비가 되면 심판의 구령(口令)에 따라 일시에 일어나서 서로 들고 걷고 걷고 다리를 안으로 감고 밖으로 감으며 잡아 두르고 일어나는 등 여러 가지 자세로 싸워 들어 던져서 먼저 넘어지는 자가 지는데, 누구든지 먼저 몸이나 손을 땅에 대면 진다.

편자가 조사한 바에 의하면 우리나라에는 현재 씨름할 때에 부리는 제주가 약 44가지 정도 있는 것으로 안다. 이제 그것을 제간별로 나누어 보면 다음과 같다. 「제간」이란 말은 씨름할 때에 부리는 제간(技能)을 말한다. 한국의 씨름에는 「관제간」, 「다리제간」 그리고 「들제간」이 추가 된다.

첫째 「관제간」이란 상대자를 손으로 당기고 밀고 젖히며 팔로 잡아 넘어뜨리는 제간을 말한다. 둘째 「다리제간」이란 상대자를 발과 다리로 걸어 당기고, 또는 걸어서 뒤로 밀어 일으켜 돌리거나 후려 넘어뜨리는 제간을 말한다. 셋째 「들제간」이란 상대자를 들어서 좌우로 돌리며 젖히어 넘어뜨리는 제간이다. 베지기류(類)는 몸통이 여기에 속한다. 베지기란 상대자를 앞으로 당겨 배 위로 들어올려 오른쪽 옆으로 돌면서 넘어뜨리는 것이다. 여기서 편자가 다년간(多年間)조사한 한국 씨름의 제간을 분류하고 이를 도표로 꾸며 보이는 동시에 또한 그 제간에 속하는 법식(法式)을 하나씩 들어 설명을 가하여 보기로 하는 바, 이 법식의 명칭은 지방에 따라 차이가 있음을 본다. 그러므로 여기서는 종래 널리 사용되어 온 명칭을 위주로 하고 아울러 이칭(異稱)도 주의하여 부기(附記)해 두기로 한다.

#### 한국 씨름의 제간

##### I. 관제간

1. 안무릎치기
2. 뒷무릎치기
3. 허리잡기
4. 손후리기
5. 턱밀치기
6. 뒤밀치기
7. 턱아제기
8. 등치기
9. 꼭두잡이
10. 달비잡이
11. 앞다리제기
12. 목누르기
13. 타누르기
14. 발물리기

##### II 다리제간

1. 안남시-----|
2. 마팔남시 | 舊稱「남시밀어」라고 한다.
3. 들남시-----|
4. 앞다리후리기----| 舊稱「다리 후리기」라고 한다.
5. 마팔다리후리기--|
6. 마로뒤잡기
7. 외로뒤잡기

Excerpt from Choi Sang-su, “The Types and Rules of Korean Ssireum”

#### 1) Hip-Lock and Pelvic-Control Mechanics of “Anmureup” and “Bakkatmureup”

- Anmureup (Sonjabi-type No. 1): A technique in which the hand is rapidly inserted into the space between the opponent’s legs, around the adductor area, and the inside of the knee or the back of the knee is strongly pulled or pushed with the palm.
- Bakkatmureup (Sonjabi-type No. 2): A technique in which the lower portion of the opponent’s quadriceps on the outside of the knee is caught and pulled by hand.
- Biomechanics of body control: The essence of these two techniques is interpreted

as temporarily locking the opponent's hip joint. When pulling a satba, the human body widens its base of support to maintain balance. If the opponent's inner or outer knee is directly controlled by the hands, the opponent cannot easily evade by moving the feet to redistribute body weight. With the base of support effectively constrained, the attacker can push or rotate the upper body in the opposite direction and use leverage to disrupt the axis of the femur and complete the throw with relatively little force. The paper characterizes this as a distinctly martial mechanism.

## 2) Peripheral-Joint Impact and Maximization of Moment in "Hokchige" and "Deopchige"

- Hokchige (Sonjabi-type No. 3): A technique in which the ankle or Achilles tendon area of the opponent is struck with the hand to disturb balance.
- Deopchige (Sonjabi-type No. 4): A technique in which the opponent's entire leg is pressed strongly from above as if covering it.
- Biomechanics of body control: The paper states that these techniques follow the physical principle that rotational torque increases as the distance from the axis of rotation to the point of force application increases. Unlike satba Ssireum, in which the pelvis or waist is controlled, striking the peripheral part of the body, such as the ankle in Hokchige, is interpreted as disturbing the axis of rotation and causing the upper body to lose balance through a large moment.

## 3) Traditional Striking Mechanics Embedded in Hand Techniques No. 5 and No. 12

A micro-level analysis of the hand-technique system in Choi's research report, according to this paper, reveals traces of "hand-striking techniques" that are prohibited in modern sport Ssireum.

- Hand Technique No. 5 [Under-Chin Strike]: When the opponent attempts to lift and throw the practitioner, such as in Deulbaejigi, the lower part of the palm is used to strike strongly upward beneath the opponent's chin. By forcing the cervical spine backward, the technique is described as disrupting the opponent's upper-body axis and neutralizing the lifting technique. Although the report describes this as a "pushing technique," the paper argues that, biomechanically, it would have to transition into a strike through instantaneous acceleration in order to be effective in actual combat. Thus, pushing and striking are treated as lying on the same continuum under the laws of mass and velocity ( $F = ma$ ), with the latter having the characteristics of a high-velocity striking technique.

- Hand Technique No. 12 [Neck Press]: A technique in which the hand that is not holding the satba, or a hand momentarily released from the satba, is used to strongly press or strike the opponent's neck, including the throat and carotid area, in order to control the opponent. The paper describes this as temporarily restricting breathing and directing the opponent's gaze downward to take control of the exchange. Unlike modern Ssireum, which uses the satba as a fixed connecting medium, the paper interprets this as reflecting the rough combative characteristics of late-Joseon Mindung-ssireum and Hamgyeong-do Soksa Ssireum, in which freer bodily engagement and striking were permitted.

### 3.4. Analysis of the "Daetoe-chigi" Technique of Soksa (Yanbian Ssireum) and Knife-Hand Striking Mechanics

According to the paper, the hand-striking characteristics recorded in Choi's document and the 1940 source were not confined to historical texts but were corroborated by modern field research. The technical system of "Soksa," described here as a form of Northern-style Ssireum and identified with present-day Yanbian Ssireum, was excavated through an academic conference jointly organized by Song Jun-ho and the Department of Physical Education of Yanbian University in 2016.

#### 1) Technical Mechanism of "Daetoe-chigi"

- "Daetoe-chigi," as classified in practical Soksa Ssireum, is described as an advanced compound technique in which, during the exchange of attacks and defenses intended to throw the opponent, the practitioner uses the edge of the hand to strike the back of the opponent's neck, around the cervical and occipital region, momentarily disrupting balance.

#### 2) Physical and Practical Difference Between Simple Pushing and Striking

- The technique may appear to be an auxiliary action used to help bring the opponent down, or it may be mistaken for a simple pushing movement. However, the paper states that direct experience of the technique in an actual grappling environment demonstrates that it is a clear striking technique, distinct from simple pushing or pressing.
- Biomechanical analysis: The paper identifies the back of the neck as a key area associated with balance and the nervous system. It argues that an instantaneous knife-hand impact to this area can temporarily interfere with automatic muscular responses associated with balance. By contrast, when an opponent is slowly pushed or pressed, the opponent can distribute body weight through the lower body and generate a reaction force. The paper argues that a sudden knife-hand strike can

disrupt spinal alignment and thereby interfere with the lower body's ability to restore balance.

Therefore, according to this paper, the Daetoe-chigi of Soksa (Yanbian Ssireum), excavated in 2016, together with Hand Techniques No. 5 and No. 12 in Choi's document, constitutes strong modern field evidence for the proposition that late-Joseon Mindung-ssireum was not merely a contest of strength but a comprehensive combative physical system incorporating sophisticated hand-striking techniques.

#### 4. THE TRANSITIONAL CHARACTER AND RETROACTIVE VALUE OF CHOI SANG-SU'S "RULES OF SSIREUM"



##### 4.1. Structural Limitations as a Late Transitional Text

According to the paper, Choi Sang-su completed and supplemented his Ssireum-rules paper in the early 1960s. This was a period when, centered on the Korean Ssireum Association, modern sport Ssireum was undergoing standardization of competition rules and equipment, and a "satba-centered competition" system was becoming firmly established. In this process, the hand-striking techniques of Mindung-ssireum, which were considered dangerous, were completely excluded from the competitive system. Thus, Choi's document is interpreted as a text in which two layers intersect: the "combative layer of the past," represented by hand-striking techniques from before the 1940s, and the "late transitional perspective" that attempted to place and systematize these techniques within the scholarly classification framework of modern sport Ssireum in the 1960s.

#### 4.2. A Retrospective Window from 1936 Toward the 1880s

Paradoxically, according to the paper, this mixture allowed practical Mindung-ssireum techniques to be preserved. Through cross-validation with the 1940 “Sports Feature” and analysis of the knife-hand striking mechanics of Daetoe-chigi excavated at the 2016 Yanbian University conference, the substantive technical content of Choi’s text can, according to the paper, be retrospectively applied at least to the middle period of the Japanese colonial era, approximately 1936–1940.

Furthermore, when the hypothesis that Choi recorded oral testimony from elderly strongmen during his 1936 fieldwork is combined with the above argument, the paper proposes that the technical prototype of traditional Mindung-ssireum practiced in rural yards in the 1880s, during the late Joseon period and the reign of King Gojong, can also be indirectly examined through this textual window, extending beyond the limitations of the 1940 newspaper text. Behind Choi’s literal chronological errors, the paper argues, a genuine Ssireum technical system connecting the late Joseon period and the Japanese colonial period was preserved and transmitted.

### 5. CONCLUSION

This study sought to identify the chronological contradictions in folklorist Choi Sang-su’s “Rules of Ssireum” and to rediscover its value as a repository of traditional source material and striking techniques. Although Choi’s work contains timeline errors inconsistent with his own birth year, the technical system recorded in the document corresponds closely with the 1940 “Sports Feature” source, supporting the paper’s argument that it is deeply rooted in empirical data.

In particular, the paper identifies Hand Technique No. 5 (Under-Chin Strike), Hand Technique No. 12 (Neck Press), and the knife-hand striking mechanism of “Daetoe-chigi” in Soksa (Yanbian Ssireum), excavated in 2016, as important evidence for retrospectively examining the combative legacy of late-Joseon Mindung-ssireum, which the paper argues clearly included hand-striking techniques despite the dominance of modern satba-centered Ssireum. In conclusion, the paper characterizes Choi Sang-su’s “Rules of Ssireum” as a powerful historical “time capsule” in which a later scholarly framework from the 1960s preserves technical and combative cultural layers from the 1940s Japanese colonial period and, through retrospective interpretation, the 1880s late Joseon period.

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## Project Framework

This paper was prepared as part of the INSF Traditional Wrestling Research

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