

THE TONGHAK RELIGION AND UPRISING:
CH'OE CHEU ON LEARNING TRUTH
AND
TWELVE REFORMS PROCLAIMED BY THE TONGHAK OVERSEER'S
OFFICE

Introduction

Tonghak was a new Korean religion founded by Ch'oe Cheu (1824-1864) in 1860. After Ch'oe Cheu was executed (as an alleged Catholic) in 1864, Ch'oe Sihyŏng (1827-1898) became leader of the religion. In 1894-1895, there was an uprising that swept Korea that was associated with Tonghak believers (the leader was a local Tonghak leader named Chŏn Pongjun [1854-1895]) and spread along Tonghak networks, though scholars continue to debate just how central the religious doctrines were to this event.

At the time of Ch'oe Cheu's mystical revelation in 1860, Catholic doctrine and teachings, though illegal, were becoming known in Korea. In 1860, furthermore, British and French troops sacked Beijing, sending shock waves throughout East Asia. For many intellectuals, including Ch'oe (a down-on-his-luck literatus), Western religion and technological/military power were associated. Catholicism was known in Korea as Sŏhak, or "Western Learning"; therefore, Ch'oe titled his new religion, which sought the revitalization of Korea beginning with the spiritual, Tonghak or "Eastern Learning."

In documents from the Tonghak uprising, meanwhile, a broad set of concerns — social, political, nationalist, etc. — are evident. The historical meaning(s) of Tonghak have been debated for over a century by scholars who have highlighted different historical moments and different aspects of its reformist goals.

The first document below is one of those in which Ch'oe Cheu described his revelation. The second was a proclamation from a local Tonghak authority in a city controlled by the rebels in the course of the 1894 revolt.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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**The Tonghak Religion and Uprising:
*Excerpts from Ch'oe Cheu on Learning Truth***

[From the *Ch'ŏndogyo kyŏngjŏn*, pp. 6-17]

In April 1860 the whole world was in turmoil, and the hearts of the people turned evil. And a strange rumor spread in the world, saying: "The Westerners cultivated high ethics, and there is nothing they cannot do. There is no one who can stand before their attacking military power, and even China is being destroyed." May we not suffer the same fate? Their Way is

Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on

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called the Western Way, their religion Christianity, and their teaching the Heavenly teaching. Could it be that they know the time of Heaven and received the Mandate of Heaven? ...

They asked: "You say there is similarity. Then would you call your way 'the Western Learning'?" I replied: "Not so. I was born in the East and received the truth in the East. Therefore, the Way is the Heavenly Way and the doctrine is the Eastern Learning (Tonghak)."

[Translated by Yong Choon Kim]

Question:

1. How does Ch'oe relate Christianity to Western military power? Should Chosŏn simply become Christian in his view? Why or why not?

**The Tonghak Religion and Uprising:
Excerpts from Twelve Reforms Proclaimed by the Tonghak Overseer's Office**

[From the *Tonghak sa*, pp. 126-127]

...

4. The wicked among the Confucian literati and the *yangban* class shall be ordered to mend their ways.
5. Slave registry documents shall be burned.

...

10. Persons who are in league with foreign enemies shall be severely punished.

[Translated by Han-Kyo Kim]

Longer Selection with Questions

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there is nothing they cannot do. There is no one who can stand before their attacking military power, and even China is being destroyed." May we not suffer the same fate? Their Way is called the Western Way, their religion Christianity, and their teaching the Heavenly teaching. Could it be that they know the time of Heaven and received the Mandate of Heaven?

To all of my feelings there seems no end. And as I was in fear and anxiety, I felt the terrible cold in my body. I then encountered the divine spirit, and, from within, I heard the revelatory voice. I looked, yet I could not see anyone; I listened, yet I could not hear. Therefore, I felt strange and mysterious. With attentive mind I asked, "How is it so?"

God said: "My mind is your mind. How could men know it? They may know Heaven and earth, but they know not the spirit. Yet I am the spirit. Now you shall attain this eternal truth, cultivate it, write it, and teach it to all people. And you shall establish the law and publish it. Then you shall be immortal and shine all over the world."

After meditating and reflecting upon this for almost a year, I came to realize the principle of the universe. Hence, I wrote the incantation and the law of communion with God and composed the song of wisdom. The heart of truth is contained in the Incantation of Twenty-One Letters.¹

In the following year, 1861, many scholars and gentlemen came from everywhere and asked me, "We heard the heavenly spirit has descended upon you. How could it happen so?" I replied, "It happened according to the principle of change in the universal history." They asked, "Then what is the name of the Way?" I said, "It is called the Heavenly Way (*ch'ondo*)." They asked, "Is it any different from the Western Way, from Christianity?" I replied, "The Western religion is similar to our religion but also different. They worship a 'God' who is not real. The forms of the truth may be similar, but their doctrines are really different."

They asked: "How is it so?" I said: "Our Way emphasizes accomplishing things through natural action. If one cultivates his mind, balances his energy, receives the divine teaching, and follows the divine nature, things will be accomplished naturally. But the Westerners have no order in their words and no pure concern for God. They pray really for their flesh, and they have no effective God. In their doctrine there is no real teaching of God. They have form, but no substance. They seem to think, but they have no incantation. Their way is vain, and their doctrine does not really deal with God. Thus, how can one say that there is no difference between our way and their way?"

¹ The "Incantation of Twenty-One Letters," important in Ch'öndogyo belief and ritual, reads:

The Ultimate Energy here and now,
I pray for its great descent.
Serving God,
I am transformed to follow the divine will.
Eternally not forgetting,
I become aware of all.

They asked: "You say there is similarity. Then would you call your way 'the Western Learning'?" I replied: "Not so. I was born in the East and received the truth in the East. Therefore, the Way is the Heavenly Way and the doctrine is the Eastern Learning (Tonghak). Moreover, since there is division of East and West in geography, how could one say West is East and East is West? Confucius was born in the state of Lu and spread his teaching in the state of Ch'u. Thus, the intellectual traditions of Lu and Ch'u spread in this world. Our way was raised in this land and will spread in this land. So how can one call it the Western Doctrine?"

They asked: "What is the meaning of the incantation?" I replied: "It is the words of the highest reverence for God, and it may be called prayer. Its spirit may be found in other present and ancient writings."

They asked: "What do the words used in this incantation mean?" I answered: "The 'Ultimate' means nothing beyond; the 'Energy' is spiritual, infinite, pervades all things, and directs all things. It is formless and, therefore, difficult to describe. It seems sometimes that one can hear it, but it is hardly visible. It is the ultimate, original, One Energy of the universe. 'Here and now' means being initiated into the Way and coming in contact with the Ultimate Energy. To 'pray' is to entreat. 'Great descent' means participation in the Ultimate Energy. 'Serving' means having the spirit within, experiencing the Ultimate Energy externally, and keeping what one has realized. 'God' must be venerated as one would serve one's parents. To 'transform' means change without self-conscious effort. To 'follow the divine will' means incorporating God's virtue and making up one's mind. 'Eternal' means one's life span. 'Not forgetting' means the constant preservation of thought. 'All' means innumerable things. 'Becoming aware' indicates realizing the truth and receiving wisdom. Therefore, if you fully comprehend God's virtue and never forget it, you shall attain union with the Ultimate Energy, and you shall attain the supreme holiness."

They asked: "If God's mind is man's mind, why is it that good and evil coexist?" I said: "Although it is said that one's nobility and baseness, one's joy and suffering, are predestined, actually the virtue of the superior person is in harmony with the virtue of the universe because of his righteous mind and conduct, but the petty individual is in conflict with the will of the universe because of his unrighteous mind and conduct. Isn't this really the principle of rise and fall?" ...

Ah, how wonderful and how brilliant you are to ask such questions about the truth. My writings convey the right and true principle, and there is no other way by which one can become righteous in bodily, intellectual, and spiritual cultivation. All the precepts of the universe and the eternal truth are contained in my writing. Thus, my dear friends, receive my words reverently and uphold the holy virtue. Then you shall be to me like a delicious spice to food and beautiful color to mere whiteness. Now my joy in the truth is so exceedingly great that I have explained this and taught it to you. Therefore, consider this carefully and do not forget this profound truth.

[Translated by Yong Choon Kim]

**The Tonghak Religion and Uprising:
Twelve Reforms Proclaimed by the Tonghak Overseer's Office**

[From the *Tonghak sa*, pp. 126-127]

1. The ill will that has long persisted between Tonghak believers and the government shall be eradicated. There should be cooperation in all aspects of governance.
2. Crimes committed by greedy and corrupt officials shall be investigated and severely punished.
3. The wrongdoers among the rich and powerful shall be severely punished.
4. The wicked among the Confucian literati and the *yangban* class shall be ordered to mend their ways.
5. Slave registry documents shall be burned.
6. There shall be improvements in the treatment of the seven classes of lowborn (*ch'ilban ch'ŏnin*), and butchers shall no longer be required to wear the "P'yŏngyang hat."
7. A young widow shall be allowed to remarry.
8. Improper levies of sundry taxes shall be completely terminated.
9. In recruiting officials, regionalism shall be eliminated, and talented persons shall be appointed irrespective of their birthplace.
10. Persons who are in league with foreign enemies shall be severely punished.
11. All past debts, private or public, shall be declared null and void.
12. Farmland shall be equitably redistributed for cultivation.

[Translated by Han-Kyo Kim]

Questions:

1. How does Ch'oe relate Christianity to Western military power? Should Chosŏn simply become Christian in his view? Why or why not?
2. Do the social reforms mandated by the Tonghak authorities in 1894 seem revolutionary? Do they aim for the fundamental overthrow of the Chosŏn social order? Why or why not?
3. Between the two documents, how would you describe the Tonghak attitude towards the Western and Japanese power and influence that were spreading within the Korean peninsula?