Establishment of *Tonghak* and Ch’oe Che-u

*Shin Yong-ha*

I. Introduction

In the mid-nineteenth century when the Western imperial powers were threatening Korea, the Korean people generated new ideologies to meet the challenge of national crisis. Of the various currents of thoughts which emerged at the time, *Tonghak* (Eastern Learning), *Kaebwa* (Enlightenment), and *Wijông Ch’ôksa* (Protect Orthodoxy and Reject Heterodoxy) formed main currents of the modern Korean thought.

All these nationalist thoughts of the times are created out of the exigencies of coping with the rising Western pressure. But *Tonghak* is particularly significant because of its outstanding originality and creativity. This alone deserves *Tonghak* an important place in the history of modern Korean thought.

In addition, *Tonghak* followers started and spearheaded the *Kabo Peasant War* in 1894. *Tonghak* thought informed and interpenetrated this revolutionary movements which in turn led to the introduction of the *Kabo Reforms*. Importance of *Tonghak* movement can be gauged by yet another fact.

Both Ching China and Japan seized the movement as an excuse to send their troops to the Korean peninsula which ultimately led to the outbreak of the Sino–Japanese War. Needless to say, *Tonghak* is a topic of tremendous significance not only in the modern history of Korea but also of East Asia. The paper proposes to describe the process of the establishment of *Tonghak*, and furthermore, it seeks to discuss ideological significance of the movement.

---

* Professor of Sociology, Seoul National University
II. Backgrounds of the Establishment of Tonghak

*Tonghak* arose from the following historical background; first, deep inroad of Western powers and Western Learning (Catholicism) into China and Korea, and second, powerful undercurrents of domestic social unrest.

With the onset of the 19th century Western steamships (dubbed then in Korea as 'strange-shaped vessel') became a common sight on the Korean shores. The first Western ship to intrude into the Korean waters was the British ship Lord Amherst. It visited the coast of Hwang hae and Ch'ung-ch'ŏng provinces for a period of twenty days in June 1832 and demanded conclusion of trade pact. Afterwards, Navigation of Western ships into the Korean waters became threateningly persistent. If we look at 1850's, the period when Ch'oe Che-u was engaged in the study of new thought, the following picture emerges. A Western steamship of unknown nationality visited Ul'gan in Kyŏngsang province in February 1850. The sailors got off the ship, and indulged in wanton shooting which caused the deaths of five civilians. In 1851 a French ship visited the coasts of Cheju island on a surveying mission. In 1852 an American whaling vessel appeared off the Tonghac coast in Kyŏngsang province. In 1853 a Russian warship commanded by Captain E.V. Potjatin conducted reconnaissance off the east coast of Korea and clashed with the local residents. In 1854 another Russian warship named Vostok reached Korea on a surveying mission. In 1855 the British warship Hornet and Sylvia conducted reconnaissance of the part of the east coast as well as of Pusan Harbor. A French warship Virgine reached Korea on a similar mission. So, year after year Western vessels made expeditions into the Korean waters causing immense alarm to the Korean people and forcing the Korean intelligentsia to look for ways and means to encounter the crisis.

Another related development which proved to be a source of immense uneasiness to the Korean people was active propagation of Western Learning (Catholicism) in Korea. Korea was detached from the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Peking and was made an independent diocese in 1831. A bishop of Korea was appointed but he died before he could set foot on the Korean soil. The second bishop Joseph Imbert entered Korea in utter secrecy in 1838 and supervised an organized and systematic popagation of the faith. Catholicism began to make rapid strides thereafter, so much so that in early 1839 the church membership reached the figure of nine thousand. The Korean court viewed the incursion of Catholicism and rapid rise of its forces with
gravity and resorted to several measures to suppress the fledgling faith. Notwithstanding, the common populace and womenfolks who were discriminated and tyrannized by the yangban bureaucracy continued to embrace Catholicism even at the cost of their lives, because no other faith in the contemporary society of Chosŏn dynasty Korea held for them any spiritual appeal. At any rate, official persecution and proscription failed to curb the growing influence of Catholicism.

In addition, news of the circumstances in China engendered a deep sense of responsibility amongst the Korean intelligentsia for the protection of the country and its people. Several events transformed the alarm of the Korean intellectuals into a panic, such as the defeat of China in the Opium War and the subsequent conclusion of the humiliating and unequal treaty of Nanking (1840—42). The outbreak of the Taiping rebellion led by Hung Hsiu-Chuan in 1850, Arrow incident of 1856, joint Anglo-French occupation of Canton and invasion of Tientsin and the humiliating Tientsin Treaty of 1858 which was concluded to defuse the crisis. When China procrastinated in ratifying and implementing the terms of Tientsin Treaty, the joint Anglo-French troops mounted once again an armed assault on China, and occupied Tientsin in July 1860. Peking, the capital of China fell to the Anglo-French forces in August 1860 and so formidable was the threat that the Chinese emperor had to flee to Jehol. A month later China completely recapitulated to the armed invasion of Western powers and signed Peking Treaty. The Korean court and literati was immeasurably shocked to hear these reports. Peking Treaty gave sweeping new privileges such as payment of indemnities of 16,000,000 dollars, concession of Kowloon island and opening of Tientsin port. The other privileges the Western powers secured through the treaty were rights of Catholic missions to hold land in China, build churches and propagate their faith, and rights of Westerners to employ Chinese coolies and send them overseas. Thus the Peking Treaty laid bare the nexus between propagation of Christianity and the use of armed force.

The complete surrender of China, so far regarded as the most powerful country of the East, to the invasion of the West sent serious shockwaves to the Korean officials and literati and made them explore possible strategy to curb the approaching threat. Ch'oe Che-u himself acknowledged that he was inspired to establish Tongbak in 1860 and propagate his doctrines a year later as a result of the shock that the complete collapse of the Chinese resistance to the Western invasion induced. He wrote;
It was rumored in 1860 that Westerners were making inroads into other nations not for riches or power but for building churches and propagating their faith. They claim that such an act is in accord with the divine will. I felt highly sceptical of their motives and said, 'how can it be true'.

The point which we need to underscore here is that the establishment of Tonghak by Ch'oe Che-u is directly linked with the terms of Peking Treaty which gave Westerners full freedom to propagate their faith in China. We need to remember that Peking Treaty was imposed on China after the imperial capital of Peking was pillaged by the joint Anglo-French forces. China's complete capitulation to the forces of the Western powers made Ch'oe Che-u firm in his conviction that the clouds of Western military threat were bound to lower soon on the Korean horizon. He wrote as follows,

The West made war and won, attacked and seized what they wanted. With China gone, we will feel cold like teeth without lips. And I pondered ways to protect the country and comfort the people.

Ch'oe Che-u used the oriental adage "if lips are gone, teeth feel cold" to describe Korea's intimate and dependent relationship with China. He meant that since the protecting shield(lip) China was destroyed, Korea(teeth) was exposed to the menace of Western aggression. A vision of this reality inspired him to devise a plan of 'protecting the country and comforting the people'. In other words, Tonghak was conceived and created as a stratagem to preserve the country from the invasion of Western powers and Christianity.

As already noted, domestic social unrest formed another component of the background of the establishment of Tonghak. Commoners suffered unbearable exploitation and injustice at the hands of the ruling yangban officials during the Choson dynasty. Small-scale popular uprisings broke out frequently in the Choson dynasty history. They weakened the foundation of the regime and signs of imminent collapse of the dynasty were evident everywhere.

---
1 Ch'oe Che-u, "P'odongmun" (On Propagating Virtue) in Tonggyong taesin (Tonghak scriptures)
2 Ch'oe Che-u, "Nonhangmun" (A Discussion on Learning) in Tonggyong taesin
3 "P'odongmun", op.cit.
With the onset of the nineteenth century the rebellion of commoners against excessive taxation and exaction and brutality of officials became a common phenomenon. Hong Kyŏng-ræc rebellion of 1811 proved to be a turning point in the history of the Chosŏn dynasty, for in its wake popular uprisings broke out without interruption and crippled the administration in the northwestern region of the peninsula. Small-scale uprisings broke out ceaselessly even in the central and southern provinces. In the year 1862 when Ch’oe Che-u started propagating his doctrines, popular uprisings broke out in thirty counties Ch’ŏnju uprising was one of them. In fact it won’t be an exaggeration to describe the nineteenth century Korea as the ‘century of peasant uprisings.’ Though these uprisings were suppressed, the hold of officials on the areas where peasants rose up in revolt remained tenuous. The administration of Chosŏn was shaken from its roots.

Collapse of the medieval, feudal administrative structure was accompanied by the process of rapid disintegration of social status system, the cornerstone of the traditional society of Chosŏn dynasty. The microscopic minority of top-ranking yangban who monopolized government positions and wealth sought to consolidate the yangban dominated status system and indulged in brazen and unbridled exploitation of the common people. However, new social phenomena seriously compromised the power and prestige of the yangban class. Instances of the sale of yangban status by déclassé yangban took place. Moreover, choice of yangban as the prime target of attack in peasant revolts contributed to the erosion of prestige of the yangban class. Commoners and lowborns demanded elimination of yangban system and establishment of an egalitarian social order. They avidly looked forward to the emergence of an ideology which echoed their sentiment and represented their views.

Under these social circumstances the moral precepts and ethical codes of Confucianism which was instrumental in the rule of the yangban class lost their relevance not only for the commoners but also for the ruling elite. Corruption was rampant. The extant religions had run their course, dried up their elan and energy and were too effete to hold an appeal as spiritual anchor of the common people. Ch’oe Che-u knew that the powerful undercurrent of social crisis was about to swell and prove fatal for the Chosŏn dy-

---

4 Ch’oe Che-u, “Kyohun’ga” (Song of Instruction) in Yongdam yusa (Legacy of Yongdam)
nasty. He was also aware of the fact that common people were waiting for a gleam of hope and strength in the age which was marked by abysmal gloom of spiritual bankruptcy. He wrote,

Four hundred years have passed since the dynasty was established and set up its capital at Hanyang (Seoul) at the foot of Samgak mountain. But what has been its achievements it can leave to the posterity? None at all.

Alas! The whole world, the whole mankind is wallowing in the quagmire.

How ridiculous! People claim to be 'superior' on the basis of their birth. People consider themselves qualified to discourse on morality on the basis of their knowledge of classics.

The whole world is doing as they please without following the heavenly principle and without obeying the heavenly mandate.

Alas, the world has run its course. Neither the Golden Age nor the virtues of Confucius will suffice.

These sentiments demonstrate that the contemporary Choson dynasty society, especially the commoners class was seized with a kind of spiritual crisis. Christianity could find a firm foothold on the soil because the existing faiths were incapable of addressing the needs of the people. Ch'oe Che-u, however, realized that Christianity was not only inadequate to meet the spiritual needs of the Korean people, but what was worse still, incompatible with the national interest. He regarded Christianity as dangerous because it was the wellspring of the strength of the Western powers, and the vanguard of the Western aggression. He felt that Western invasion of Korea would

5 Ch'oe Che-u, "Monggung noso mundapka" (Talk with Young and Old While Dreaming) in Yongdam yusa
6 Ch'oe Che-u, "Kwonhakka" (Song of Encouragement of Learning) in Yongdam yusa
7 Ch'oe Che-u, "Todókka" (Song of Virtue) in Yongdam yusa
8 "Podöngmun" (On Propagating Virtue)
9 "Monggung noso mundapka" (Talk with Young and Old While Dreaming)
follow close on the heels of Christianity.\textsuperscript{10}

This is the context in which Ch’oe Che-u felt the necessity to found a new thought and religion which would protect the country and comfort the countrymen, aiming, furthermore, at the salvation of the whole mankind. Founding Tonghak became the sole mission of his life.

III. The Incentive and Process of the Establishment of Tonghak

The founder of Tonghak, Ch’oe Che-u was born on October 28, 1824 in Kajong village, Kyong-ok township, Wolsong county which is now a part of Kyongsangbuk-do.

Ch’oe Ok, Ch’oe Che-u’s father was endowed with enormous intellect. He was well-versed in both literature and philosophy and was an avid student of the philosophy of Yi Ön-yok(1491-1553) and Yi Hwang(T’oeogy, 1501-1570).\textsuperscript{11} He repeatedly failed, however, in the imperial examination because merit was immaterial in the corrupt society of Chosön dynasty. He married a woman of Chöngö family. She bore him a son but soon both she and the newly-born son died of disease. He was remarried to a woman of Sŏ family She bore him two daughters but no son. He craved for a son, so at the age of sixty-three he took a young widow Madam Han, as a concubine. Ch’oe Che-u was born of this union.\textsuperscript{12}

In Chosön society, Ch’oe Che-u was regarded as illegitimate. A son of Ch’oe Ok’s second wife Lady Sŏ would have been eligible to inherit his father’s social status, but unfortunately she bore only two daughters. Meanwhile, Ch’oe Ok adopted his nephew Ch’oe Che-hwan to continue the family line. Craving for a son induced him to take a concubine, but this union was without social legitimacy according to the current practice because it was consummated while his second wife was alive. Thus Lady Han was entitled only to the status of a concubine Chosön dynasty law disqualified concu-

\textsuperscript{10} "Nonhangmun" (A Discussion on Learning)

\textsuperscript{11} Ch’oe Ok’s extant work entitled Kinsamch’up bears testimony to the fact that he was an accomplished traditional scholar

\textsuperscript{12} Kyongu Ch’oeus Tadongbo (Genealogical Record of Kyongu Ch’oe Clan) Vol. 1 Also see Yi Ton-hwa, Ch’ondogyo Ch’angginsa (A History of the Founding of Ch’ŏndogyo), Ch’ŏndogyo Central Headquarters, 1933.
bine-born sons of *yangban* to appear at the Imperial examination. So intense was the discrimination and social prejudice against concubine-borns in the contemporary society of Chosŏn dynasty that they were not allowed even to call their father father. To make the matter worse, Ch'oe was a son of a widow who remarried as a third wife. Therefore, Ch'oe Che-u was burdened with the stigma of an inferior social class from his very birth.

Ch'oe was bereaved of his mother at the age of six and grew under the tutelage of his father. His father started giving him conventional education in the Chinese classics when he was eight. He possessed uncommon intellect and very retentive memory.\(^\text{13}\) When he was ten, however, he realized that his low status and standing in the contemporary society disqualified him from seeking office through examination system, no matter how great his learning were. The sense of hopelessness and depression which afflicted Ch'oe Che-u in the early years of his life is not difficult to guess.

The aging father thought that he should get his unfortunate son married before breathing his last. So, Ch'oe Che-u got married at the age of thirteen to a girl of Pak clan. Four years later when he was eighteen he lost his father. Now left an orphan, bereaved of the only person of social status who loved him, he keened almost as if to spit blood.\(^\text{14}\)

After three years of mourning he asked his wife to go to her parents' house and set off in quest of means of livelihood and spiritual enlightenment. He was 20(1843) when he started wandering across the country, and he was 31(1854) when he returned to his wife. For eleven years, he learned various trades, earning his bread at the same time.\(^\text{15}\) During the period he learnt military arts, including horse-riding and archery with a view to taking the military service examination which was open even to concubine-borns.\(^\text{16}\) Then he tried his hand on several trades in the market such as running linen shops.\(^\text{17}\) He also tried his hands on such miscellaneous arts as medicine, acupuncture, and fortune-telling.

In addition, he is said to have studied various religious texts during his

\(^{13}\) "Mongung noso moundapka" (Talk with Young and Old While Dreaming)

\(^{14}\) Ch'oe Che-u, "Sudŏngmun" (On Cultivation of Virtue) in *Tonggyŏng taeryŏn*

\(^{15}\) "Kyoohun'ga" (Song of Instruction)

\(^{16}\) Yi Ton-hwa, Ch'ŏndogyo Ch'anggŏnsa (A History of the Founding of Ch'ŏndogyo) Vol. 1, p 4

\(^{17}\) O Chi-yŏng, *Tonghaksa* (A History of Tonghak), 1944, p. 1
years of wandering. He learnt texts of Taoism from the famous Taoists of the country. He visited famous Buddhist temples of the country and learnt tenets of Buddhist philosophy from learned monks. Hearing that Catholicism possessed profound philosophy, he even studied it too. But none quenched his spiritual thirst. He returned home in despair at the age of 31, without any solution.

Though the eleven long years of wandering did not satisfy his quest for spiritual enlightenment, they did not go in vain either. The travel broadened his outlook and gave him an insight into the reality of his country. He realized that the forces of Western nations and Catholicism to which China capitulated were making inroads into Korea as well. He also observed that common people were reeling under the abuses and exploitation of the officials and collapse of Chosön dynasty was imminent. Awakened to the reality of the deep crises which had engulfed his country, he was convinced that he was not alone in the search. And as a result he felt inspired to found religion and system of thought which reflected the aspirations of his countrymen, especially the common people, which echoed their mute sentiments and gave them strength to overcome the deepening national crisis.

During the next five years after returning home Ch’oe Che-u engaged himself wholeheartedly in deep study meditation and prayer sustaining himself only with water. Thus he bent his whole spiritual energy on discovering the new thought and religion which could defend the interests of the nation and secure the livelihood of its people.

Especially the news of the Western invasion and depredation surrounding such incidents as the Tientsin Treaty of 1858 and the joint Anglo-French occupation of Peking in 1860 filled Ch’oe’s heart with deep shock and anguish. Thus he experienced all on a sudden a revelation on May 25th and heard the word of God. Ch’oe Che-u wrote about the incident as follows;

Meanwhile in April 1860 the world was in state of chaos and confusion and people were bewildered. Strange news spread everywhere. “The Westerners established a doctrine which was unrivalled in its strength

18. Ibid, p. 2
19 “Kyohun’ga” (Song of Instruction) and “Kwonhakka” (Song of Encouragement of Learning)
and through whose efficacy they could work wonders. None could match them in war." Ch'na lay in shambles and I thought "Won't we perish as well? If the lip is gone, the teeth will surely feel cold".

The reason why Westerners are invincible is that their way is called the Western Way, their learning is called Western Learning or the Teaching of the Lord of Heaven. It was also rumored that they knew the heavenly order and received the Heavenly mandate.

These are only a few samples. And I also felt remorse at being born late. Then I experienced trembling of my body, and I felt the Spirit and heard the word of God. I saw and couldn't see, I heard and couldn't hear.2

Thus Ch'oe Che-u explained that he was chosen by God to receive his doctrines. But if we scrutinize these doctrines minutely, it becomes obvious that what Ch'oe termed as revelation was an outcome of his own rigorous intellectual exercises. Ch'oe spent years of restless days and sleepless nights in order to create a way which could preserve the country from foreign forays and relieve the poor and helpless people from the quagmire of miseries. And as noted above, all the while he was engrossed in deep thought, sincere prayers, meditation and contemplation All of a sudden he had an inspiration which led him to discover the new way. Since he was weakened in body, is it not likely the voice of God which he heard was the voice of his own soul, his internal voice?

After receiving the Way Ch'oe Che-u spent one year giving his new doctrine a theoretical framework, composing incantations made of 21 words and establishing prescriptions and rules for following the Way. He started propagating his faith in 1861,21 and so successful was his evangelical work that he won about 3,000 converts only in six months' time22

---

20 "Nonhangmun" (A Discussion on Learning)
21. Ch'oe Che-u, "Ansunga" (Song of Comfort) in Yongdam yusa. Also see "Nonhangmun" (A Discussion on Learning)
22 "Sudongmun" (On cultivation of Virtue)
IV. Concept and Intellectual Resources
Ch’oe Che-u’s Tongbak Thought

It is clear from the extracts of Ch’oe Che-u’s works which we cited above that it was primarily with a view to countering the menace of Sŏhak (Catholicism) that Tongbak was founded. Ch’oe Che-u saw that Western powers at whose hands China suffered crushing defeat were now forcing Korea to open its door. And he knew that as China which traditionally served as a shield of protection against any foreign attack on Korea lay in shambles Western invasion of Korea was no longer a remote possibility. He founded Tongbak as a stratagem to protect the country and comfort the people.

Ch’oe Che-u analyzed the forces of Western powers as the Way (the Western Way) including the Western Learning or Catholicism, the doctrine of the Holy Bible as well as the arms and ammunitions which made them so successful in wars. In Ch’oe’s view the former, i.e. the Western Learning was more formidable in its strength and more concrete in its manifestation and impact than military force. That is why he regretted the fact that he was born later than the founder of Christianity and founded Tongbak with an essential objective of curbing its challenge. The fact that Tongbak was founded as an antithesis to Sŏhak is further illustrated by the statement of Ch’oe which he gave to his followers. To quote:

Q. If so, what do you call your Way?
A. Ch’ŏndo, The way of Heaven.
Q. How is it different from Catholicism?
A. Though Catholicism seems analogous to Tongbak, it is different Catholicism also has prayers but their prayers lack in substance. The Way of the Catholic faith is identical to that of ours, but our principles are different.
Q. If the Way of Catholicism is the same as that of yours, as you say, why don’t you call your way also Catholicism?
A. I was born in the East and received my Way in the East, so even if my Way is Heavenly Way, my learning is Eastern Learning (Tongbak). Moreover, as the world is divided into East and West, how can we call the West East or vice-versa. Confucius was born in the state of Lu and disseminated his doctrines in the state of Chou. So he imbibed and transmitted the culture of Lu and Chou states. Similarly, I
received my Way and then spread it in this Eastern country. Therefore how can you call it Western Learning (or confuse it with Catholicism) 23

What is remarkable in the above statement is the distinct national identity of Tongbak which Ch’oe seeks to assert and emphasize. He argues that Tongbak and Catholicism of the West have the Heavenly Way in common and even share the same destiny, but since their teachings and doctrines are different, Tongbak and Catholicism are basically two different religions and ideological entities.

In other words, Ch’oe Che-u stressed the fact that since different regions and cultures had cradled Tongbak and Catholicism, they were radically different in their essence and elements.

According to him, the Heavenly Way may be the same, but since the world is divided into East and West, Tongbak and Catholicism cannot but be different. It is to be remembered that Ch’oe uses the word ‘Tong’ in his statements to convey two different shades of meaning depending on the context. For example, when Ch’oe talks about division of the world into East(Tong) and West(So), he means Eastern hemisphere of the globe. But when he says that he received the Way in the East and therefore, called his doctrine Tongbak(Eastern Learning) the word East refers to Eastern country(Tong-guk), the traditional name of Korea. Most of the Korean intelligentsia called their country ‘Eastern country’ rather than Choson. Ch’oe’s likening of the indigenous roots of his ideology to the Lu-Chou roots of Confucianism seeks to emphasize the same meaning. He wished to underscore the point that Tong in Tongbak stood for Eastern country, i.e. Choson.

It is clear from the above analysis that Ch’oe envisioned a combination of two contents and contexts when employed the word Tong in Tongbak—first the East or the Orient and second the Eastern country(Choson). Additionally we also notice that Ch’oe Che-u’s Tongbak inheres two meanings at the same time—Heavenly Way of the East and Heavenly Way of the Eastern Country(Choson).

If we scrutinize Ch’oe’s views on the Western powers and Catholicism, we notice that unlike the exponents of ‘Wijung Ch’oks(a(Protect Orthodoxy and Reject Heterodoxy) school’, he did not denigrate Western powers as beasts

23 “Nonhangmun” (A Discussion on Learning)
nor did he denounce science and technology as wicked skills and queer tricks. He held the Western powers as representatives of mighty forces, morally upright, successful in all the affairs and invincible in all the wars. It demonstrates that Ch'oe's perception of the West and Catholicism was objective and realistic.

Ch'oe identified Tongbakh with Catholicism in the way and its destiny, but differed them in their teachings and principles. He accepted the fact that both were flourishing and promising faiths and possessed the same Heavenly Way. Thus we see that unlike many religions which are sectarian and subjective in their character and profess and propagate that God belongs only to their religion, Ch'oe Che-u had a more universalistic and objective concept of God. He placed Eastern and Western civilizations on equal footing and his view was not colored by subjective pride or prejudices. Such a view stands in sharp contrast with the contemporaneous W'yang Ch'oksa school which despised the West as bestial and vicious, since Western culture and customs were incompatible with Confucian precepts and principles enunciated in the Three fundamental principles and Five moral rules in human relations which it held as sacrosanct and infallible.

As noted earlier, Ch'oe Che-u was well acquainted with the ideological systems and scriptures of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. These three major religions of the East became basic sources of Tongbakh thought. He believed that the three traditional religions had run their course and dried their vitality, and therefore, were unable to protect the country and provide for the people. Tongbakh brought to a happy fusion the composite religious wisdom of the country. Moreover, Tongbakh did not fail to realize the relevance of the new thought and religion of the West. Ch'oe Che-u told his disciple and successor Ch'oe Si-hyông:

In reality our religion is neither Confucian nor Buddhist. It is not even Taoist. But it is a synthesis of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. In other words, though our religion is neither Confucianism nor Buddhism nor Taoism, these three religious streams constitute a part of Heavenly Way.25

24 "Podôngmun" (On Propagating Virtue)
25 Yi Ton-hwa, Ch'ongdojo Ch'orangu, Vol. 1, p. 47 Also see Ch'ongdojo-si (Book of Ch'ondogyo), in Asea Yon'gu, Vol. 3 No 1, p 216
In addition, diverse streams of knowledge—the doctrines of Wang Yang-ming, theory of Yin-Yang and five elements, thoughts of Ching(Philosophy of Change), geomantic theories, spirit-worship, thoughts of Chŏnggammok—exercised a profound influence on Tonghak thought, some of whose ideas are reflected in Tonghak teachings Ch'oe acquainted himself with all the intellectual forces at work in the Orient. He opened his mind to all the confluence of Eastern thoughts and integrated them critically and creatively into the structure of Tonghak thought. Ch'oe Che-u did not stop here, but made use of the Western thoughts. He accepted the challenge of a new age and showed readiness to accept new ideas from the West. As a devil's advocate he wove them into the texture of Tonghak.

V. Ideological significance of Tonghak

Tonghak which underwent the above mentioned process of establishment has the following salient features.

1) Thought of Unitarian Ultimate Vital Force

Ch'oe Che-u believed that the whole universe was composed of ultimate vital force(Ch'ongi). The point to note here is that Ch'oe Che-u differentiated between vital force(ks) and ultimate vital force(Ch'ongi) and emphatically argued that the universe was not made of vital forces but of ultimate vital force. He believed that ultimate vital force does not have form nor can it be seen. It is the force which produces and dominates all objects of the world. Ultimate vital force of Ch'oe may be understood to mean energy in the modern concept. Ch'oe advocated that 'Heaven' and 'Man' are the most divine, the loftiest of all the objects created of ultimate vital force. Since 'Heaven' and 'Man' are the most godlike, they can correspond and unite into one force.

26 "Kyohun'ga" (Song of Instruction)
27 "Nonhangmun" (A Discussion on Learning)
28 "Sudŏngmun" (On cultivation of Virtue)
29 "Yongdamga" (Song of Yŏngdam)
30 Yŏngdam ywa (Legacy of Yŏngdam)
31 "Mongung noso mundapka" (Talk with Young and Old While Dreaming), op at
32 Tonghaksai (History of Tonghak), p 2 op at
33 "Nonhangmun" (A Discussion on Learning). Also see Tonghaksai (History of Tonghak), p 7
2) Thought of Unity of Heaven and Man

Ch’oe Che-u believed that God and Man are spiritual and divine in their essential character. Both influence each other and unite with each other through the medium of divine ultimate vital force. Thus, if one cultivates one’s heart and rectifies one’s ultimate vital force, one can achieve sagehood.\textsuperscript{34}

Even before the establishment of \textit{Tonghab} there existed some philosophical systems which professed the unity of heaven and man, but they were heaven-centred. God occupied pivotal and preponderant position and humans were subservient to the divine will. Uniqueness of Ch’oe’s philosophy lies in the fact that he tilted the fulcrum in favour of man. He established a human-centered religious belief. \textit{Tonghab}’s thought of unity of heaven and man can be called a Copernican break from the traditional Oriental belief.

3) Thought of Attending God in Humanity

Ch’oe Che-u preached the idea that god dwell in the body and mind of human beings\textsuperscript{35} and established the principle of ‘Attending God in Humanity’. In other words Ch’oe put forward the epochal notion that the body and mind of every human being is the abode of God. Thought of attending God in humanity is the nucleus of \textit{Tonghab} thought and essence of its moral precepts.

Ch’oe Si-hyông, disciple of Ch’oe Che-u carried forward the tradition of his master. He said that human heart should be regarded as palace of God. He further warned against doubting the existence of God because in his view it amounted to doubting the existence of oneself.\textsuperscript{36} Thought of attending God in humanity occupies a central place in the prayers and incantations composed by Ch’oe Che-u.

4) Thought of Calm Mind and Correct Vital Force (\textit{Susum Chöng-gi})

Grounded on this philosophical thoughts, Ch’oe Che-u established thought of calm mind and correct vital force as the substance of discipline. It enunciates the idea that internally one should act according to one’s awakened conscience and thus have clear and calm mind and externally one should have correct vital force reflected on one’s face or in one’s actions.

\textsuperscript{34} “Nonhangmun” (A Discussion on Learning)
\textsuperscript{35} “Kyohun’ga” (Song of Instruction)
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Tonghaksu} (History of Tonghab), pp 68-69
Ch'oe said that Confucius taught four cardinal virtues, benevolence, righteousness, decorum and knowledge and he was adding another one, the virtue of calm mind and correct vital force. He further explained:

I put forward a fresh idea of calm mind and correct vital force. The gentleman's vital force is orthodox and his mind is stable so that he is united with the virtue of the Universe (heaven and earth). The amoral man's vital force is not orthodox and his mind is unstable. So it contradicts the will of the Universe. Is this not the principle of rise and fall?

5) Thought of 'Man is God'
Consistent with the thought of unity of God and man and that of 'attending God in humanity', Ch'oe put forward the thought of 'man is God'. He said that since human heart is the abode of God, human beings are God. Ch'oe Si-hyöng, the second patriarch of the Tonghak order preached that human beings are God and asked Tonghak followers to 'serve human beings as gods'.

Tonghak's philosophy that human being are God revolutionized the thinking of the times by refuting the postulation of other faiths which believed that God is an absolute and separate entity and human beings are under God's overarching control. Tonghak's thought of levelling God with human beings represents the loftiest and the noblest ideal of humanism. This concept of humanism infused hope and confidence in the hearts of the common people and lowborns who suffered inhuman abuses and exploitation at the hands of the yangban officials. That is why they greeted it with such enthusiasm.

6) Thought of Equality
Tonghak's equation of Man with Heaven, the thought of serving Man as God provided for a unique system of thought on equality. It was essentially aimed at dismantling social discrimination and inhere the idea of respect for all human beings irrespective of their social standing and status. Since God dwells in the heart of all human beings, discriminations and differences be-

37. "Sudongmun" (On cultivation of Virtue)
38. "Nonhangmun" (A Discussion on Learning)
39. "Nonhangmun" (A Discussion on Learning) Tonghaks (History of Tonghak)
40. Ch'ŏndogyo Ch'anggimsa (A History of the Founding of Ch'ŏndogyo), Vol.2, pp 37-38
tween one’s wives and concubines, masters and slaves, men and women, old and young, rich and poor are arbitrary and untenable. All are basically equal and any form of discrimination and division including that between high and low is in contravention of God’s will. For example, a yangban cherishes a god in his heart, and a commoner has the same god in his heart, who dwells in the heart of a lowborn too. Since all share the same god, they should be equal.

Thus Ch’oe Che-u repudiated the discriminatory yangban-based social status system. He also prophesized that the spirit of equality will be the hallmark of the coming age. The poor and low of today, he said, will be the rich and powerful of tomorrow.

Tongbakh also raised a strong voice of protest against low social status and standing of women. He argued that women’s heart is also an abode of God and moreover, women beget God in the form of children. So he espoused equality of sexes and besides, exhorted Tongbakh followers to cherish and respect women as an invaluable component of human society.

Tongbakh discerned spark of divinity even in children and forbade its followers to strike children because it was tantamount to striking God.

7) Thought of the Evolution of New Age

Ch’oe Che-u divided the history of mankind broadly in two stages, Former Heaven and Latter Heaven, and contended that both these stages marked the evolution of a new age. He said that the Former Heaven spanned about fifty thousand years and could be divided into three periods. Civilization had not yet dawned during into the first periods. The second period started with the birth of Confucius and propagation of his teachings. The third period represented the most mature phase. It was in this period that Ch’oe Che-u was born and spread his doctrines. He prophesized that at the end of the third period, the Former Heaven would be torn asunder by chaos, moral degeneration will reach climactic height and the Latter Heaven will make its advent.

Ch’oe further said that the coming age would be that of Tongbakh. He

41 “Todökk’a” (Song of Virtue)
42 “Kyohun’ga” (Song of instruction)
43 Ch’öndogyo Ch’anggönsa (A History of the Founding of Ch’öndogyo), Vol. 2, pp. 36-37
44 Tonghaksa (History of Tongbakh), p. 64
45 “Podöngmun” (On Propagating Virtue)
contended that he was chosen by God to create a thought which was capable of protecting the country, comforting the people and salvaging the whole mankind. It is obvious that Ch’oe negated the extant thought, wisdom and religion which dominated the Eastern mind since the dawn of the civilization and thus emphasized the revolutionary character of his religion and freshness of his thought.

8) Thought of Heaven on Earth

Ch’oe Che-u opposed the Catholic paradise and argued that paradise should be built on earth. He offered a vision and promise of heaven on earth by contending that all the commoners would become superior men if converted to Tongbakh faith. Moreover, he said that if they lived unitedly, their dwelling place, the earth would change into paradise. He further asserted that even Western invaders would be repelled, if the commoners embraced Tongbakh faith.

Thought of paradise on earth was a utopian concept which Ch’oe conceived and constructed as a fitting response to the Catholic paradise.

VI. Conclusion

Tongbakh won large following and dug deep roots amongst commoners and lowborns ever since its inception in 1861. Ch’opdu (Overseer) system was organized in 1862 in the fourteen counties of Kyōngsang province with a view to systematically administering Tongbakh followers. Rapidly growing popularity of Tongbakh thought and the attendant expansion of the ranks of Tongbakh followers caused immense alarm to the court and literati of Chosǒn dynasty. As a result Ch’oe Che-u was arrested in December 1863, incarcerated in Taegu prison and beheaded to death on March 10, 1864. Ch’oe mounted the scaffold with dignity and poise and told the magistrate as follows:

Tongbakh is not an outcome of my subjective wish but owes to heavenly command. Therefore, let it be known to you that even though you are putting me to death, generations to come will embrace my

46 “Mongang noso mundapka” (Talk with Young and Old While Dreaming)
47 “Kyohun’ja” (Song of Instruction)
48 “Sudongmun” (On Cultivation of Virtue)
49 Ch’ondogyo Ch’anggōnra (A History of the Founding of Ch’ondogyo), Vol. 1, p 42
After martyrdom of Ch’oe Che-u, Ch’oe Si-hyŏng (1827–1898) inherited the leadership of Tongbak order. Despite the fact that Tongbak thought was branded as heretical and subversive, that Ch’oe Che-u was killed and Tongbak order was prescribed, common people continued to join the ranks of Tongbak. They braved untold hardships to embrace its God. The fact that commoners of the times risked their lives to join Tongbak demonstrates the extent of appeal Tongbak ideology held in the contemporary society. One drawback of Tongbak which needs to be pointed out is that it put undue emphasis on the religious dimension of Western powers. It did so, however, because it was created with an objective of encountering Catholicism, the ideological weapon of the West. It ought to have paid due attention to science and technology, military force and political, economic and social system of the West. It may be considered as Tongbak’s weakness. Nonetheless, Tongbak gave to the Korean people a strong ideology of nationalism by raising the slogan of ‘protect the country from foreign invasion and comfort the countrymen’. It put forward the loftiest ideal of humanism by advocating ‘man is God’. An attendant injunction was that man is not servant of God but at par with God. Its emphasis on equality gave considerable hope and confidence to the down-trodden and deprived populace of the nation who were victims of the rapacious avarice and exploitation of yangban officials. Its teaching that mankind, being from God, was essentially equal in its origin which everyman bears and serves deep within oneself proved to be an inexhaustible source of spiritual strength to the common people of Chosŏn dynasty living in an era of spiritual bankruptcy. Thus in 1894, that is, a generation after Ch’oe Che-u was put to death, peasants in south, central and partially in the northern regions of Korea rose up in revolt and started what is known in history as the Kabo Peasant War of 1894. Tongbak provided ideology and organization to the peasants and became driving force of the Kabo Peasant War of 1894.

(translated by N. M. Panka)

50. Tonghaksa (History of Tonghak), p. 18
GLOSSARY

Ansimga 安心歌
Chigi 至氣
Ch’ŏc Che-u 崔濟愚
Ch’ŏc Ok 崔塾
Ch’ŏndo 天道
Ch’ŏndogyo Ch’anggŏnsa
天道敎創建史
Chŏnggamnok 鄭鑑錄
Chŏpchu 接主
Hanyang 漢陽
Kabo Peasant War 甲午農民戰爭
Kabo Reform 甲午改革
Kaehwa 開化
Kı 氣
Kunamjip 近庵集
Kwonhakka 勤學歌
Kyohun’ga 教訓歌
Kyŏnu Ch’ŏessi Taedongbo 慶州崔氏大同譜
Mongung noso mundapka 夢中老少間答歌
Nonhangmun 論學文
O Chi-yŏng 吳知泳
P’odongmun 布德文
Samgak mountain 三角山
Sŏ 西
Sŏhak 西學
Sudongmun 修德文
Susun Chŏnggi 守心正氣
Todŏkka 道德歌
Tong 東
Tongguk 東國
Tonggyŏng taejín 東經大典
Tonghak 東學
Tonghaksu 東學史
Wijŏng ch’ŏksa 衛正斥邪
Yangban 兩班
Yŏ Ton-hwa 李敦化
Yongdam yusa 龍潭遺詞
Yongdamega 龍潭歌