

The Religious Meaning of
Ch'oe Che-u's Tonghak Doctrine,
1860-1864

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Until the middle of the nineteenth century Korea had experienced and had experimented with various alien doctrines: religious, political, social, or otherwise. Three major Chinese doctrines—Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism—were introduced into Korea during the period of the Three Kingdoms in Korea, which lasted until the unification of Korea by the Silla in A.D. 668. The Silla dynasty (57 B.C. to A.D. 931), which was one of the Three Kingdoms, became a patron of Chinese teachings, particularly Buddhism. As a result, the succeeding dynasty, Koryo (918 to 1392), continued to promote Buddhism at the expense of the other two. After the Yi dynasty (1392 to 1910) came to power in the fourteenth century, the more politically oriented Neo-Confucianism (Chu Hsi's version) began to enjoy the patronage of the ruling elite and the scholars of the time. During the following five-hundred-year reign of the Yi house the religiously oriented doctrines of Buddhism, Taoism, and shamanism of a Korean version were pushed into the background, if not completely eliminated, by the ruling elite (*yangban*). But in the teeth of official persecution, they managed to survive, and in the middle of the nineteenth century they found a patron in the person of Ch'oe Che-u. Not only did he synthesize all three Chinese teachings plus Korean and Western religions, but he also provided the people with spiritual inspiration and guidance.

Ch'oe Che-u's Tonghak doctrine, known as "Eastern Learning," was created in 1860. Since then it has undergone a series of changes in its theory and practice. Historically, at least in the very beginning, it began as a religious teaching composed of the major and minor existing cultures (Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, shamanism, and traditionalism) together with Christianity, which was introduced into Korea in the nineteenth

century. The initial Tonghak doctrine was not only eclectic but also religious. It encouraged its followers to rely on personal salvation and/or self-enlightenment rather than on external authority for their answers to the problems of life. It did not defy or reject the existing political regime, nor did it believe that political reform could result in peace of mind for the individual.

Recent scholarship has stressed the political and social elements of the Tonghak doctrine. This emphasis is understandable, because the later Tonghak movement became a popular political movement and finally culminated in the form of a prototype of the Korean nationalist movement in the wake of the Sino-Japanese War of 1895.¹ The later Tonghak movement, indeed, was religious as well as political and social in nature, but the earlier movement and doctrine were more religious and ethical than otherwise. The confusion arose from the fact that the later followers of the Tonghak doctrine became more politically and socially concerned. And then they incorporated their own ideas into the Tonghak doctrine. Ch'oe Si-hyong, Chon Pong-chun, and Son Pyong-hi are good examples of the above development. They all contributed to the later version of the Tonghak doctrine during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is not to treat the early Tonghak doctrine as a political and social gospel but rather as a religious and ethical teaching. To do this, I will proceed with the assumption that there are internal standards of validity in ideas themselves² and also that ideas are functions of the persons who express them and the shape that ideas take is relative to the culture and era in which they develop and are used.³ I will reject the assumption that ideas or doctrines can be understood only within the context of the prevailing political, social, economic, and cultural realities. Often there is a danger that this will lead to a discussion in terms of causes and effects, that is, that realities are the causes while ideas are the effects. A study of ideas themselves may provide us with valuable clues, though not complete answers, to the problems resulting from and/or related to the ideas.

In studying the Tonghak doctrine of Ch'oe Che-u, one is struck immediately by the fact that its sources are numerous. Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Christianity were assimilated into what was known as indigenous Korean shamanism and traditionalism. As a result, all these teachings, except

Christianity, became an integral and inseparable part of Korean culture. In view of this fact, it is extremely difficult for us to separate one source from the other, and it is equally difficult to define or trace back the meaning of the concepts as found in the Tonghak doctrine. An idea borrowed from one source was frequently blended with a concept adapted from another. Thus, not only was the resulting syncretism or synthesis taken for granted, but it was also impossible to relate the ideas to their original sources. For example, the Korean term for heaven (*ch'on*) originated either in Chinese classics or in indigenous Korean myths, but it could also refer to a Christian heaven. In other words, Tonghak terms or concepts may have contained many different connotations and denotations taken from Chinese, Korean, and Christian sources. The Tonghak conception of heaven cannot be entirely Eastern or Western but is a synthesis of both. To take another example, the term Confucianism (*yuhak* or *yukyo*) may mean the philosophy of any Confucianist (Confucius, Mencius, Hsün Tzu, Tung Chung-shu, Chu Hsi, or Wang Yang-ming), or it may mean a combination of the ideas of two or three of these Confucianists. Diversity of content is also seen in Buddhism, Taoism, shamanism, and traditionalism, from which Tonghak derives its main ideas.

These difficulties in understanding the Tonghak doctrine are intensified as a result of Ch'oe Che-u's explanations of certain Tonghak ideas and quotations from Chinese, Korean, and Christian sources. His expositions and quotations are unsystematic and unclear. This makes it difficult for us to establish conceptual connections between an idea and its source, or the exact origin of the idea within a given conceptual framework. To be more specific, Ch'oe Che-u, the initial interpreter of the Tonghak doctrine, seldom gave credit to other thinkers or to what they had done. Instead, he treated the borrowed ideas as if they were his own. Last but not least, our study of the Tonghak doctrine is further complicated by our own misunderstanding, if not distortion, which is the result of differences in time and place.

The initial Tonghak doctrine expounded by Ch'oe Che-u was apolitical. Ch'oe is said to have received "divine revelations" in 1860. Until then he had wandered around many parts of Korea in search of spiritual enlightenment, visiting many famous Buddhist temples, mountains, rivers, and people. After 1860 he began to explain the religious experiences and spiritual

enlightenment in terms of what he called Tonghak (Eastern Learning). Yet his supporters soon became political outcasts to the government because of their support of Roman Catholicism, which had been banned for some time. Ironically, the Tonghaks were regarded as pro-Christian and responsible for disgracing Neo-Confucianism, which had been officially considered orthodox. They did not challenge the government authority or defy the status quo, and yet their leader, Ch'oe Che-u, was arrested and summarily executed in 1864.⁴

The government accused Ch'oe and his followers of using such terms as Heavenly Master (*ch'onchu*) and Supreme Lord (*sangche*) in reference to God or heaven, expressions widely used by Korean Catholics. Being afraid of possible government persecutions, Ch'oe consciously played down the importance of Christianity, an increasingly popular religion in Korea. He called his teaching Tonghak, or Eastern Learning, as opposed to Sohak, or Western Learning. The purpose of such gestures was obviously to mollify the government and at the same time to impress its anti-Christian officials. Having witnessed the Christian-inspired Taiping Rebellion in China and having been disturbed by the event, Ch'oe became increasingly and openly hostile to Christianity on the grounds that it was too politically motivated. Ch'oe said:

Late in 1860 I heard rumor that Occidental people take no interest in wealth and high positions in order to fulfill the will of Heavenly Master. Yet they conquered the world [referring to China] to establish churches and propagate their Way [meaning Christianity]. Thus I began to question why the Western Way had been so [aggressive and mean].⁵

It appears that Ch'oe detested the politically, economically, and religiously aggressive nature of Christianity and of the Western powers connected with it. At the same time, he tried to underscore the importance of his Tonghak doctrine in coping with the situation in Korea, but only in a spiritual or religious way. He hinted that "his object was the maintenance of all the old national customs and religion, as against Christianity and its doctrine, which was then gaining some ground."⁶

But on the other hand Ch'oe did not, and perhaps could not, eliminate Christian elements from his thinking. Despite his personal antipathy toward Christianity, there is considerable evi-

dence of Christian elements in Ch'oe's Tonghak doctrine. For example, the story of Ch'oe's conversion or revelation in 1860 so closely resembles the account given by St. Paul that it seems likely that Ch'oe borrowed the story without acknowledging the source. A comparison of the two versions of conversion is illuminating:

Suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven . . . and [Paul] heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. . . . And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do. Acts 9:3-6.

Suddenly in April my heart shuddered and my body trembled . . . in the midst of this experience my ears suddenly heard a mysterious voice which said: "Do not be frightened. The people in this world called me the Supreme Lord. Then why did you not know who I am?" I asked the Supreme Lord why He chose to speak to me in this way and He answered: "I myself could have accomplished little, and so decided to send you to the world to teach my Law to all." [Pp. 16-17]

While acknowledging some similarities between his doctrine and Christianity, Ch'oe felt that the differences were more important: "Their [Christians'] purpose is similar to mine, but they do not have truth [in their doctrine]" (pp. 27-28). Moreover, Christians had no logical sequence in their speech and their written works, nor did they have proper decorum in their worship of God. Even worse, they used prayer for selfish ends, and their knowledge of God was superficial and distorted. When Ch'oe was asked if his teachings were Western, he emphatically retorted: "My answer is no, because I was born in the East and received the Way in the East. Thus my Way is the Heavenly Way and my Learning is the Eastern Learning." He continued: "As you see, the land is divided into East and West. Then how can we say that West is East and East is West. . . . I received my Way in this land, and will propagate my Way in this land. Then how can I call my Way Western?" (p. 29).

Despite his emphasis on the differences, when asked why people in the world did not respect the Heavenly Lord (*ch'on-chu*), Ch'oe replied, "It is human nature that the first time most people ask for the Heavenly Lord is at their deathbed" (p. 32). He then alluded to the biblical story in which one of the two thieves who was being crucified with Jesus pleaded with Him, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom" (Luke 23:42). Like Jesus, Ch'oe made clear that his mission was to save his followers by spiritual enlightenment rather than political reform, for he doubted the efficiency or effectiveness of politics in improving the conditions of his followers. What Ch'oe really desired was the creation of a peaceful spiritual state of mind rather than a materially prosperous but secular state on earth.

The same reasoning can be found in Ch'oe's discussions on Confucianism. According to Ch'oe, the cardinal principles of Tonghak are found in the traditional Confucian relationships of king to subject, father to son, husband to wife, aged to young, and friend to friend. A realization of these relationships can only come from self-cultivation (*susin*), thereby enabling man and heaven to become one and the same (p. 85). This idea of self-cultivation also indicates Ch'oe's willingness to make a gradual change in the minds and spirits of individuals rather than a drastic change in society and government (p. 31). In the spring of 1860 Ch'oe received a revelation from heaven and also learned, after an extensive study of the *Book of Changes* (*Ikyong*; *I-ching* in Chinese), that if a person controlled and constantly improved himself, then nothing would prevent realization of his aspirations. Here again, Ch'oe seems reluctant to admit that the idea of self-cultivation came from Confucian classics. What Ch'oe simply said was that if a person studied Confucian teachings carefully, he would find them not only reasonable but also very similar to Ch'oe's Tonghak doctrine (pp. 42-43).

From the above it is also clear that Ch'oe did not advocate a radical change in the government and society in either theory or practice, but that he approved of Confucianism as a means of spiritual self-improvement, although the latter had become the basis of the socio-economic-political systems of the time. It is difficult to identify completely Ch'oe's views with the initial version of Confucianism, and consequently his version of Confucianism became increasingly difficult to label. In his description of the role of man, for example, Ch'oe asserted that the two

principles, both positive and negative (*umyang*), had produced hundreds of thousands of things, of which man was the most spiritual and perfect being; for man had established and had clarified the laws and functions of heaven, earth, and man, along with the five agents (*ohaeng*) (p. 22). When asked why the mind of heaven was the mind of man and why there were both good and bad, Ch'oe replied that the virtue of a princely man (*kuncha*) was in union with the virtue of heaven and earth, while the virtue of a mean man was in discord with the virtue of heaven and earth. Only the will of the Heavenly Master alone could dictate the course of all these events (p. 31). In general, Ch'oe sounds like the Han Confucianist Tung Chung-shu, who had discussed the role of man and his relationship to heaven and earth and the five agents.

Ch'oe also stressed the perfection of self through the cultivation of belief (*sin*) and sincerity (*song*), both of which required serious self-discipline and study. He argued that man should be armed with the strong senses of belief and sincerity in order to distinguish between good and evil. He believed that man could develop belief and sincerity simultaneously, because these were closely related not only etymologically but also in the process of learning and practicing. The character belief means the words of man, whereas sincerity means the fulfillment of his words. By this, Ch'oe meant the people should value the importance of self-perfection through the process of education. On another occasion he repeated the same theme: every individual should make his maximum effort for self-perfection, since emperors and scholars created laws and institutions for the benefit of the people (p. 51). In his *Song of Admonition* (*Kyohunka*) Ch'oe stressed the five Confucian ethics (*oryun*) as a means to achieve self-perfection (p. 84). But he did not fail to point out how difficult it was to follow these Confucian teachings, remarking that "only seventy-two out of three thousand candidates had really become good students of Confucius" (pp. 99-101). The reason for such selectivity was that "heaven only helps those who have accomplished self-cultivation from time immemorial" (pp. 99-101). For this reason Ch'oe believed that only those who had achieved self-cultivation through their own efforts could enjoy happiness as such.

In discussing the attainment of the Way (*to*), derived from the Confucian classic the *Great Mean* (*Chungyong*; *Chung-yung* in Chinese), Ch'oe suggested that one should simply iden-

tify himself with the Way of Heaven with all his heart, spirit, honor, benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom plus sincerity and respect (p. 118). He added that, however, it would be hard to do so, because man often would find it difficult to act upon anything in this world (p. 120).

From the preceding remarks, one can see similarities in the attainment of the Way between Ch'oe and Wang Yang-ming in style and logic when it comes to self-cultivation or self-perfection. For example, Wang believed that self-cultivation leading to the attainment of the Way would serve the purpose of improving both state and society. But on the other hand, Ch'oe felt that this kind of spiritual change in the hearts and minds of the people would be conducive to and tolerable to the existing regime, because he regarded it as within the framework of the old order. Noticeable is the fact that the manner in which Confucianism was treated by Ch'oe was far more religious and ethical than political, while Wang was more politically and ethically oriented than otherwise in his treatment of Confucianism.

Then how did Ch'oe use or incorporate Buddhist concepts into the making of his Tonghak doctrine? Here again, Ch'oe used and synthesized Buddhist elements into his own religious and ethical doctrine. Although Buddhist ideas as such are minimal in the Tonghak doctrine, such Tonghak concepts as heart-cleansing and bodily purification seem to be related to and derived from Buddhism. The following example is typical: Ch'oe urged his followers to "rectify the crooked minds so as to grasp truth. . . . Ridding [ourselves of] dirty minds, let us cultivate gentle and good minds with all our hearts" (p. 58). He also urged them to believe in the Way, not to study it. But Ch'oe did not acknowledge his indebtedness to Buddhism, nor did he refer to it. What is surprising is that Buddhist concepts such as merit-making (*kongtak*; *kung-te* in Chinese—the translation of *karma* in Sanskrit) are distorted from their original meanings. While the Buddhists used and advocated merit-making as opposed to simple faith in the process of attaining spiritual salvation (*nirvana* in Sanskrit), Ch'oe simply regarded it as one of many means "to facilitate the attainment of one's perfect mind" (p. 110). Also, Buddhist elements took the form of a synthesis blended with a kind of Confucianism. Ch'oe stated: "Benevolence, righteousness, propriety and wisdom . . . were taught by wise men of ancient times [referring to Confucius and his dis-

ciples] but self-cultivation (*sun*) and rightful mind (*chongki*) were solely created by myself" (p. 45).

All these concepts were a mixture of both Confucian and Buddhist ideas, yet Ch'oe did not identify the sources of these concepts. Besides, Ch'oe, to our amazement, treated the law of purifying one's body from natural and moral filth as a Taoist idea.⁷ All these statements suggest that there were at least two things in Ch'oe's mind. One is that the concept of purification had three elements: that is, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, which were blended together. The other is that Ch'oe himself was uncertain of the exact origins of these ideas. Thus, perhaps Ch'oe did not know the original or intended meaning of these terms.

In the opening pages of the "Essay on the Propagation of Virtues" (*pothksun*), Ch'oe, perhaps unintentionally, admitted that his doctrine had been strongly colored by Taoist views, particularly his doctrine on life and nature. He wrote of nature: "From time immemorial spring and autumn have come and gone. The four seasons are evidence of the Heavenly Master's art of creation demonstrated to the world." "People," he continued, "left the course of each action and inaction and each victory and defeat as well, to the mercy of Heavenly Mandate (*ch'onmyong*). . . . A man would become a princely man if he would have fulfilled the principles of Way and Virtue" (pp. 13-14). Ch'oe's views of nature were a potpourri of Taoist and Confucian elements, for his views in many respects parallel those of Taoists, particularly those of Lao Tzu. But there were some differences in his understanding of nature and man. For example, Ch'oe believed that the laws that affected changes in nature were immutable, but he did believe that those governing man's moral character could be altered. To put it differently, the former can be compared to those of Taoism, whereas the latter can be compared to those of Confucianism. But at times he did not separate one from the other in his use of the laws. For example, he described a princely man (*kuncha*) as a man who submitted himself to the Heavenly Principle (*ch'onli*) or the Heavenly Mandate (*ch'onmyong*) (p. 15). Obviously Ch'oe is referring to Confucian natural laws, because Taoism itself does not emphasize human submission to and reverence for a physical entity of any kind. This assumption can be made from the fact that Ch'oe implied that the Way and Virtue were a kind of human effort to fulfill certain tangible requirements

necessary for communion with the Tao, or "Superior One," who would and could perfect humanity. However, Ch'oe did not view Way and Virtue as the metaphysical Taoist concepts of the *Tao* and *Te*, which exist above and beyond human conception and control.⁸

In his "Essay on Learning" (*nonhakmun*) Ch'oe again demonstrated his synthesis of both Confucianism and Taoism when he described the role of man in the universe and the nature of the universe:

Man (sage) established and clarified the laws of the three geniuses: heaven, earth and man. He also created the principles of the five agents. What are the five agents? Heaven is the source that operates the five agents; earth is the foundation that makes them; man is the representative of them. With these five agents the laws of the three geniuses—heaven, earth and man—can be perceived. Four seasons have come and gone; wind, dew, frost and snow have never understood such secrets of nature. Some people said these were nothing but spontaneous creations of the law of nature. Whether these were the blessings of the Heavenly Master or not, we cannot see them. Even if these were spontaneous creations of the Heavenly Master, it is too mysterious to describe them in words. The reason is that from ancient times until now nobody has yet unlocked the secret laws of nature. [Pp. 22-23]

Ch'oe understood the creation of the universe more or less in Taoist terms. In his comments on the tangible results that nature produced, Ch'oe referred to heaven and earth, and yet he did not distinguish between the intangible Creator of heaven and earth and the eternal or unnamable Way from which all emanated (pp. 50, 52, 54). Therefore the above quotation conveys the impression that the kind of Confucianism Ch'oe had in mind was Tung Chung-shu's version of "Han" Confucianism, because of his lengthy remarks on Taoism and his frequent use of the five agents.⁹

The story that Ch'oe was immortal or a fairy (*sonin*) also gives us certain parallels between Ch'oe and Chuang Tzu. Like the Taoists, Ch'oe compared himself to an immortal being and also to a dragon or tiger: "I am an immortal being . . . and I can be either a tiger or a dragon [at the same time]" (pp. 73,

79, 118). He went on to say that as an immortal being he possessed the powers of a sorcerer as well as the vision of a messiah and could even provide elixirs and panaceas (pp. 79, 80, 89).

Upon reading this passage we are immediately reminded of the popular Taoist stories in which Chuang Tzu, a student of Lao Tzu, turned into a butterfly and in which the later Taoists promised to provide either elixirs or panaceas. But there are vast differences between the two. As for Ch'oe, he went one step farther than the Taoists. First, he asserted that man transformed himself into an immortal being, or a dragon or a tiger, in order that heaven and man could communicate with each other in spirit and body. Second, based on this assertion, Ch'oe advanced a more audacious idea; that is, the idea of *innæch'on*, which means that both heaven and man are one and the same (pp. 25, 31-32).

From the above it appears that Ch'oe did not regard Buddhism or Taoism as political or social doctrines. Ch'oe did not suggest any political or economic reforms for improving peoples' lives. Instead, men should look inwardly and transcend the realities of life in searching for solutions to all of their problems. Throughout his discussions on Buddhism and Taoism, Ch'oe very seldom made any attempts to relate them to an improvement of the state and society.

Ch'oe, himself the proud possessor of elixirs and a sojourner to the world of the spirit, was also interested in the so-called shamanism inherent in the traditional customs and practices of Korea. Shamanism, by definition, is a primitive religion of northeast Asia in which those who call themselves shamans act as both priests and medicine men, possessing spiritual and healing powers respectively. They also communicate with supernatural forces, both good and evil. Here again, Ch'oe incorporated some of the indigenous shamanist practices into his Tonghak doctrine and practices, perhaps to gain more converts for his cause (p. 26).¹⁰

Ch'oe, for example, suggested that altars should be built on mountain tops, especially on high mountains, in order to propitiate the spirits that bring fortune or misfortune. The worshiper had to learn "magic" formulas (some of which were combined from such characters as *kung*, *kung* and *ul*, *ul*) adapted from key words or ideographs taken from the *ch'am-wisol* literature, which many Koreans believed had great efficacy for predicting national crises (p. 44).¹¹ In June 1861, Ch'oe is

said to have come into possession of a kind of elixir, shaped like the characters *kung* and *ul* combined, and he formulated the twenty-one-letter incantation for immortality or longevity. In 1863, he widely propagated them to rid the evils from this world, along with his other instructions (pp. 44, 57).

According to Ch'oe, one "must drink a cup of water mixed with a sheet of paper" to become an immortal being (p. 78). One "must not eat bad meat of the four-legged animals [referring to dogs]"; one "should not suddenly jump into the cold [water in the] well for it is bad for health"; and one "should not recite the incantation in a high-pitched voice while lying [in bed]" (p. 46). In the process of obtaining immortality, one had to fall into a trance. In order to enter into a trance one had to go through a series of physical exercises in the form of singing songs, reciting incantations or poems, and doing ecstatic dances, practices which were not only prevalent but also inherent in shamanist religious ceremonies. Ch'oe also encouraged his followers to appreciate the aesthetic values of ballads, poetry, and music, some of which were equally valued in Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, and Korean traditionalism (p. 103).

In the area of healing, one can also notice a synthesis of all existing ideas. Ch'oe accommodated Confucianism; to get elixirs and immortality one had to abide by the principles of sincerity (*song*) and respect (*kyong*), without which he said one could not heal himself (p. 119). He admitted on several occasions that these two concepts came from Confucianism and that they were nothing but the results of human effort as found in it (p. 108). Also, he stated more than once that it is possible to cure disease without medication if one really has faith in and reverence for the Heavenly Master (pp. 35, 108). This gives us the impression that Ch'oe at this time seemed to think of healing in terms of its Christian counterpart.

In the method of childbearing, particularly of a male child, that was practiced by the Tonghaks, one also finds a synthesis of shamanism and other existing ideas. For example, Ch'oe used the concept of geomancy (*p'ungsu*), a mixture of both Confucian and Taoist elements. He urged his followers to go to Kumkangsan (known as Mt. Diamond in Kangwon Province today) and select a place of residence in accordance with the principles of geomancy. Then they could bear not only male children but also highly gifted ones (pp. 110-11).

Equally interesting is the origin as well as the nature of Ch'oe's shamanism. Surprisingly, Ch'oe made no pretense of being original in this case. Explaining the origin of shaman, he said: "Han (Chinese) shamans came to our Eastern Region [referring to Korea] and spread their teachings to every household throughout the land." As to the nature of shamans, Ch'oe believed that everything, including heaven and earth, has and is a spirit or demon (*kwisin*). In addition to this pantheistic and polytheistic view of shamanism, which in effect is characteristic of all primitive religions, Ch'oe further believed that his version of shamanism was the result of the interplay of the laws of geomancy, or *um* and *yang* (p. 116).

Here again, in discussing the theory and practice of shamanism, Ch'oe did not relate it in any way to the improvement of the state and society but regarded it only in a spiritual or religious way.

Lastly, let us examine the so-called Korean traditionalism in relationship to Ch'oe's Tonghak doctrine. According to Professor Yi Son-kun, in the Tonghak doctrine, "Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism no longer function separately but in combination." This means that the human ethics of Confucianism, the spiritual awakening of Buddhism, and the Taoist detachment from the mundane world were integrated into the so-called Korean traditionalism. They had been developed by Ch'oe Ch'i-won, a noted reputable Confucian scholar of the Silla period, according to Yi. He expounded the three major Chinese ideas of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, and he synthesized them into a single system that became the foundation of the ideologies of the Hwarang elite, the ruling class of the Silla kingdom. According to Yi again, Ch'oe Ch'i-won is the direct ancestor of Ch'oe Che-u, that is, the latter is the twenty-eighth descendant of the former. On the basis of this family lineage, Yi concludes that Ch'oe Che-u inherited the Hwarang ideas and customs developed by his ancestor and integrated them into his own Tonghak doctrine.¹²

Although Yi's argument is somewhat controversial, a link seems to exist in terms of the similarities of custom and practice between the ninth century (the time of Ch'oe Ch'i-won) and the nineteenth century (the time of Ch'oe Che-u), at least in the area of nature appreciation, travel, and excursion. As has been pointed out earlier, Ch'oe Che-u was fond of traveling and visiting beautiful places such as rivers, lakes, mountains, and

forests (pp. 43, 56, 97, 103-4, 106).¹² His love for nature is well demonstrated by his poetry, whose themes range from boats, flowers, bamboo, rivers, mountains, the moon, fish, and birds to sight-seeing (pp. 65-69). Among these things there is cogent, if not altogether convincing, evidence of similarities between the Tonghak and the Hwarang concepts of enjoyment or play (*yu*). Both the Hwarangs and the Tonghaks traveled primarily in search of spiritual enlightenment, but they also traveled for the sake of enjoyment. This can be found in the words of Ch'oe Che-u: "Let us play and eat to the full" (p. 103).

But there is serious doubt about the validity of this interpretation. The fact is that Ch'oe compared himself to T'ao Yuan-ming, a famous Chinese poet who was noted for his love of nature, and also frequently quoted him in his writing (p. 39). In view of this conflicting evidence one cannot be dogmatic about the origin of the concept of play (*yu*). Furthermore, it is difficult to equate the Tonghak doctrine and practice with the Hwarang counterparts, on the grounds that the former is more religiously oriented, whereas the latter is more militaristic and political on the whole. At best one can only say that a certain amount of so-called Korean traditionalism is blended, along with other ideas, into the Tonghak doctrine.

It is clear by now that the Tonghak doctrine as expounded by Ch'oe Che-u during the period 1860 to 1864 was not a single set of many separate ideas but a combination of many integrated and blended ideas. It was composed of existing Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, shamanism, and traditionalism, juxtaposed by and supplemented by the totally alien Christianity. In the course of Korea's long history, particularly from the first to the nineteenth centuries, many Chinese ideas came to Korea and then gradually became assimilated. This integration of Chinese ideas into Korea was so successful that Korean thinkers acquired the built-in habit of ideological or cultural syncretism to the extent that they no longer could distinguish one idea from the other. Nor were they conscious of the fact that their learning or culture was nothing but a syncretic form of ideas.

If there is anything new or unique in the synthesis of the Tonghak doctrine, it is that Ch'oe Che-u incorporated both the orthodox learning—Neo-Confucianism blended with Buddhism and Taoism—and the vulgar or heterodox ideas such as shamanism, traditionalism, and Christianity. Moreover, Ch'oe

popularized both orthodox and unorthodox learnings, to the chagrin of the ruling elite, the patrons of orthodox learning.

In the period 1860 to 1864 the Tonghak doctrine took little or no interest in any political or social revolution. Instead it concerned itself with the reforming of the individual's mind and spirit, capitalizing more upon the existing yet acceptable ideas than upon the new. The Tonghak doctrine itself was apolitical. It taught its followers to resort to spiritual enlightenment in solving their political, economic, and social problems. It also appealed to them to reinforce the old order or ideas in order to succeed in their objective.

However, it is ironic that Ch'oe Che-u's Tonghak doctrine was branded as antigovernment and unacceptable to the ruling elite despite the fact that there was virtually no political content in the doctrine. If indeed Ch'oe had entertained any political ambition and incorporated it into his doctrine, he might and could have become a Hung Hsiu-ch'üan (of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom) in Korea. Yet, unlike Hung in China, he did not use his doctrine for political advantage. Even when he was at the pinnacle of his prestige and influence, Ch'oe did not attempt to develop a political base in the politically and economically troubled society of Korea, which in many respects was comparable to that of China at about the same time. Equally ironic is the fact that after the sudden execution of Ch'oe in 1864 his followers found themselves and their interests drawn into the political and social arena against the initial wishes of their mentor, becoming political activists on the eve of the Sino-Japanese War of 1895.

NOTES

1. Chong-sik Lee, *The Politics of Korean Nationalism* (Berkeley, Calif., 1965), pp. 19-33. Also see Benjamin B. Woerns, *Reform, Rebellion and the Heavenly Way* (Tucson, Ariz., 1964), p. ix. Lee has treated the Tonghak movement as a beginning of Korean nationalism, whereas Woerns has regarded the Tonghak doctrine as "quasi-religious ideology" connected with political movements. The most recent work on the subject is James Kenneth Ash, "The Tonghak Rebellion: Problems and Interpretations," *Bulletin of the Korean Research Center* (June 1969), No. 30, pp. 89-106. In addition to these Western works there are a considerable number of articles on the subject written by both Korean and Japanese scholars. But they all have treated the subject more or less from the political, social, or economic standpoints. For further information

and bibliography, see Yi Ki-paek, *Hankuk sa sinron* (New interpretations on Korean history; Seoul, 1967), pp. 314-20.

2. Max Lerner, *Ideas Are Weapons* (New York, 1939), p. 8.

3. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York, 1939), p. 50.

4. Weems, *Reform, Rebellion and the Heavenly Way*, pp. 7-12.

5. *Tongkyong saechon* (Great canon of Tonghak classics), ed. and trans. Ch'oe Tong-hwi (Seoul, 1961), pp. 15-16. This collection contains Ch'oe Che-u's writings such as poems, essays, and songs. The *Tongkyong saechon*, originally published in 1890, was used by Ch'oe Tong-hwi. The *Yongtam yusa* (Posthumous poems on Tonghak) is included at the end of this work. The *Yongtam yusa* and *Tongkyong saechon* are considered to be the basic canons of Tonghak. Hereafter *Tongkyong saechon* will be cited in the body of the paper by page number only.

6. Joseph H. Longford, *The Story of Korea* (New York, 1911), p. 14.

7. Weems, *Reform, Rebellion and the Heavenly Way*, p. 8.

8. James Legge, *The Sacred Books of China: The Text of Taoism* (New York, 1891), p. 47. According to Legge's translation of Tao, "The Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name. (Conceived of as) having no name, it is the Originator of heaven and earth; (conceived of as) having a name, it is the Mother of all things."

9. Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J., 1963), pp. 271-96.

10. See also John Lofland, *Doomsday Cult* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1966), especially pp. 1-4 and 14-28. This study points out startling similarities in the religious doctrines and practices of Ch'oe Che-u and Soon Sun Chang (rather, Chang Sun-son). Chang, a young Korean electrical engineer during the late 1940's and early 1950's, received a series of what he took to be messages from God, which he began to preach in the late fifties and early sixties in Korea and the United States. It is interesting to note that there are certain elements of shamanism in Chang's religious thinking and practice, as there were in Ch'oe's counterparts. These similarities may be due to the long history and great importance of shamanism among the Koreans.

11. See also Weems, *Reform, Rebellion and the Heavenly Way*, pp. 8, 19; Lee, *Politics of Korean Nationalism*, p. 28, Ash, "Tonghak Rebellion," pp. 92-93.

12. Yi Son-kun, *Hankuk sa hyontae pyon* (Contemporary Korean history; Seoul, 1963), p. 125.

13. About the concept of *yw* (play) as related to travel and nature appreciation and to the cultivation of the Hwarang clan, see Chong-sun Kim, "Hwarang and the First Unification of Korea" (Master's thesis, University of Washington, 1961).