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**Kallander/Salvation through Dissent**

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## *Introduction*

Tonghak, or Eastern Learning, was a Korean religion founded in the second half of the nineteenth century. Tonghak may also be read as “Korean Learning” because, before the twentieth century, Korean writers often referred to the Chosŏn dynasty as “the eastern country” (*tongguk*) in geographical relation to China. As a local religious response with national and international import, the teaching first promised spiritual and physical renewal and then culminated in an armed uprising. As believers developed a particular consciousness as a community, they posed a threat to the state monopoly on religion. In the wake of faith-based movements in China, of which the Korean dynasty was tributary, the state responded with repression, forcing movements underground. Today, the religion is best known for inspiring the eponymous 1894 Tonghak rebellion. Lasting for less than a year, the uprising made headlines in American and European papers because of its perceived threat to Western missionaries and brought Chinese and Japanese forces to Korea, sparking the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895). The swift Japanese intervention heralded the end of Korea’s Sinic-oriented worldview and accelerated Japan’s involvement in Northeast Asia, leading ultimately to the absorption of Korea into the Japanese Empire in 1910. For Western powers, Korea’s reliance on foreign intervention was an example of the dynasty’s inability to govern itself. The rebellion’s legacy as the “Tonghak revolution,” as it is commonly referred to in South Korea – while in the North it is best known as “the 1894 peasant war” – became a rallying cry for Korean nationalists in the twentieth century, a key element of a national identity based upon resistance to authoritarian power and foreign interference.

Tonghak beliefs and politics of contestation were part of a broader nineteenth-century trend of religious revivalism. From the great revivals of the United States and Europe to new Hinduism in South Asia, peoples across the globe were turning to religion energized by charismatic leaders who empowered followers and challenged established practices. The use of religion for political activism and sometimes violence to push back against powerful military and ideological forces was a common reaction to displacements and incorporation into economic global capitalism and colonialism. In Indonesia, for example, the transformation of the

Minangkabau economy from gold to coffee export fueled a religious war in 1803 between conservative Muslims and their reform-minded counterparts, who ultimately fought Dutch colonial forces in the 1820s and 1830s. In Algeria, the claims to prophecy of a rural cleric named Bu Ziyān attracted a considerable following and led to a brief uprising against French occupation in 1849, resulting in his death. For others, religious activism involved patriotic defense against foreign militaries. Russian colonialism in parts of Central Asia resulted in armed resistance, some of which was inspired by Sufi leaders and pan-Islamic reformist movements. In 1888, Abu Jummayza claimed to be a religious prophet and headed an opposition movement against the Egyptian invasion of Sudan (Western Darfur). The brief Mormon rebellion in the Utah Territory from 1857 through 1858, when armed followers clashed with US forces, offers another example of religious-inspired political action that resulted in antistate violence.

While the divergent geographical and political context underscores how religious revivalism was informed by a complex set of circumstances and local histories, it also spoke to a number of broad themes.<sup>1</sup> Higher literacy rates, greater access to education, wider circulation of published materials, increased mobility that brought religious intellectuals into contact with new forms of knowledge and ideas, some of which were transnational in nature, defined these religious revivals.<sup>2</sup> The language of these leaders may have found inspiration in the past, but they sought to build community in the present that would allow people living in new sociopolitical conditions to make sense of their worlds. As Ira Lapidus explains, faced with the impact of capitalism and the rising economic influence of Europe in international trade, Muslim reform movements in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries “turn[ed] to the past to look for inspiration for adaptation to current and future conditions.”<sup>3</sup> Spurred by the impact of colonialism and imperialism, Muslim religious leaders in places as disparate as Central Asia and Senegal found inspiration in reform movements beyond their immediate settings, especially when local leaders traveled afar.<sup>4</sup> In some cases, marginalized groups in India sought ways to reinforce their positions through the creation of new rituals and religious practices based on past traditions, while Islamic groups in Senegal explained the outbreak of such diseases as cholera through religious discourse.<sup>5</sup> Passionate rhetoric and the itinerancy of religious figures characterized some forms of religious activism in the United States, particularly related to social programs of improvement.<sup>6</sup> Changes in the international balance of power, as well as weakening state control, contributed to the rise of religious revival and reform movements in North America and Iran.<sup>7</sup>

Whether in the United States, Central Asia, Northern India, or the Middle East, people reacted to the uncertainty around them, the changing nature of international politics, and their incorporation into the global capitalist system by turning to religion, because religious movements could tap into familiar practices and values that appeared rooted in a less corrupted past, bringing together socioeconomic or geographic groups that would otherwise remain divided. In other words, religious revivals offered solutions to far-reaching economic, political, and social transformations in accessible terminology while they stirred up forms of imagined communities by creating a new sense of collective identity.

### **Religious Contestation in Chosŏn Korea**

Responding to patterns of political change, economic dislocation, and imperialism, Tonghak spoke to the social and economic weakness of Korea's governing elites who monopolized religious expression. Korea's Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) was founded upon Neo-Confucian practices. Ardent Neo-Confucian scholar bureaucrats, the elite of Korea, introduced sweeping reforms over a population largely practicing Buddhism and popular folk beliefs, and by the sixteenth century these scholar bureaucrats had retooled society—especially governance and family structure—to conform to certain Neo-Confucian principles, one of which was the strong distrust of popular religion.<sup>8</sup> While Confucianization was an ongoing process, scholars in the Korean government, who disdained Buddhism and popular folk practices, elevated Neo-Confucian ideals to the position of orthodoxy, making it a state-supported socioreligious worldview. Buddhism and folk religions continued to be practiced, but monks and shamans were relegated to the lower stratum of society and other popular practices discouraged. The appearance of Catholicism, along with Western merchant and missionary presence in East Asia, heightened official resistance to heterodox practices. To be sure, the government tolerated a certain amount of “religious pluralism” because practitioners of Buddhism and shamanism did not undermine the Neo-Confucian governance of the state.<sup>9</sup> By the nineteenth century, the government confronted financial constraints, straining its ability to alleviate economic hardships and forcing some people into morally unacceptable behavior that included banditry, while others resorted to armed rebellion. More and more “rebelled” by following nonmainstream doctrines such as Catholicism or Tonghak that challenged the religious monopoly and moral authority of the state.<sup>10</sup>

When Ch'oe Cheu (1824–1864), the founder of Tonghak, first began

talking about his ideas in 1860, his teaching attracted a wide range of believers, including peasants, slaves, and even rural literati who were interested in the variety of religious messages he put forth, most of them of a personal nature. Tonghak blended Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist ideas and reformulated them in populist ways with shaman and folk beliefs. Instead of relying only upon Confucian or Buddhist teachings, both of which he practiced, Ch'oe promised immediate solutions, such as recitations or concoctions to restore vitality and attain enlightenment. In writing of such beliefs, Ch'oe explicitly connected Korea to a larger religious world, one beyond China and even India, innovatively placing Korea at the center. With a concomitant lack of modesty, he hinted at the superiority of Korea over other nations; his hometown over the capital, Seoul; and himself over all others.

In writing his doctrine, Ch'oe incorporated various currents of East Asian thought, including long-practiced beliefs in geomancy, Daoist elixirs of immortality, and Confucian theories of political legitimacy and social stability, but his cosmology was anchored in a belief in God. This God—Sangje in literary Chinese or Hanullim in vernacular Korean—was the same as the Western deity, Ch'oe explained, but the West failed to understand him. God appeared to Ch'oe in the East, not to Europeans in the West. When writing about his religious conversations with God, he borrowed Sangje and Ch'ŏnju, the terms Catholics used to describe their God. But if Ch'oe was influenced by Catholicism, he astutely chose not to admit it and described his new Tonghak faith as the antithesis to Catholicism and Western Learning in general.

For Korea's ruling elite, Tonghak could not simply be relegated to a kind of popular religion and allowed to exist alongside orthodox Confucianism. As Pak Sŏngju has pointed out, Ch'oe Cheu never claimed that his teaching synthesized the Three Ways of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism into a single doctrine, as later leaders and the church asserted.<sup>11</sup> Nor did he or Tonghak leaders claim any popular religious elements in Tonghak. If Tonghak combined the Three Teachings with folk practices, as contemporary scholars generally agree, why did the central government suppress the religion? Cognizant of the ongoing challenges the Chinese state confronted with unorthodox religious groups, Chosŏn dynasty officials deployed these as precedents for state action against individuals or groups that organized based on religious texts and charismatic leaders. Faced with Tonghak ritual claims that threatened to impede the state's efforts to maintain "ritual hegemony," the central government intervened.<sup>12</sup>

Even more, the government clash with Tonghak repeated its earlier bouts with Catholicism in the nineteenth century. Korean awareness of

Catholicism began with embassies traveling to Beijing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, returning home with Jesuit texts that had been translated into literary Chinese. After the Korean Catholic community developed near the end of the eighteenth century, it suffered a number of bloody persecutions from 1801 to 1871. Despite deep ideological differences, the experiences of Catholicism and Tonghak share commonalities. Both challenged government authority over the private and public practice of religion, while followers rallied around doctrine that sanctioned their respective religious worldviews through the approval of a heavenly God. Tonghak doctrine, letters, and later church writings—not to mention the circulation of Catholic and Christian translations, pamphlets, and works—were part of a struggle for power through the medium of religious discourse.<sup>13</sup> While Catholicism challenged government domination for the first half of the nineteenth century, in the second half Tonghak accomplished much the same.

Numerous studies point to the tenacity and rising popularity of Catholicism and Tonghak, followed by Christian groups like the Protestants, in the final decades of the nineteenth century and Buddhism remained attractive among elite patrons. Boudewijin Walraven and others indicate the growth of Buddhism as a popular belief in the late Chosŏn dynasty. Religion touched all corners of society, and whether they were turning to Buddhism, finding hope for salvation in Catholicism and later Christianity, or looking for ways to improve their health in Tonghak, Koreans were curious about the religious beliefs of their neighbors and other villagers. Surrounded by religious passion, Ch'oe had his finger on the pulse of the southern countryside, and he wrote a doctrine that satisfied this heightened religious interest. Some of his beliefs were nativist, particularly relevant to the southeast, but Ch'oe's thought empowered everyone, especially the underrepresented. And the environment of heightened religious experimentalism, in which Tonghak played a central role beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, served as the basis for the deeper interest in new forms of religion in Korea's twentieth century and beyond.

### **The Tonghak Phenomenon**

Scholars in the twentieth century have constructed the Tonghak uprising as antiforeshadowing, whether directed against China, Japan, or European and US missionaries. This emphasis obfuscates peninsular dynamics. The penetration of foreign merchants in the country and the exportation and hoarding of rice by foreigners, most of whom were Chinese and Japanese,

have been blamed for contributing to peasant discontent. Han Ugün, for example, argues that the opening of Korean ports to Japanese merchants exacerbated poverty in the rural sector, thereby pushing peasants into revolt.<sup>14</sup> He identifies Japanese capital and Japanese and Korean government oppression against the peasants as major reasons for peasant discontent that ultimately led to the Tonghak uprising.

Yet while Tonghak beliefs may have motivated some rebel leaders, its adherents formed only one component of the uprising. The language of the petitions that circulated during the uprising was secular, not divine, and couched in respectful Neo-Confucian terminology. Followers learned that their cohesion might work in their favor to compel the government to adopt certain social and religious policies, as well as defend the country against the Japanese presence. Because the government continued to misunderstand the faith and interfere, Tonghak leaders rallied followers and united them against the government and Japanese troops, but they did not articulate a sustained and unified political or religious program, suggesting a community that was not clearly united in its aims. While its leaders wanted the freedom to lawfully practice their faith, some followers were more interested in material rewards and the settlement of personal scores. It was the religious needs of the community—to legalize the practice of Tonghak and punish corrupt officials in order to preserve the state and its ability to defend the people—rather than a social and egalitarian agenda that ultimately energized the leadership into political action.<sup>15</sup>

Tonghak's story yields a snapshot of the economic conditions of the countryside in mid-nineteenth-century Korea. Anders Karlsson argues convincingly that while in earlier decades the state addressed famine by creating an elaborate system to feed the rural population and maintain social hierarchy, particularly in the south, it was less responsive to structural faults than acute disasters.<sup>16</sup> By 1860, poverty, disease, crumbling irrigation systems, and floods strained traditional forms of family support and solidarity. Tonghak spoke to this situation by offering a way to empower people to improve their lives as state rural programs fell short.<sup>17</sup> During these middle decades of the nineteenth century, the central government engaged the countryside primarily when political stability was at stake, leaving local-level officials relative autonomy to deal with unrest of the sort posed by Ch'oe and Tonghak prior to 1863, when the central government became involved in the affair.<sup>18</sup>

Tonghak was a religion, a philosophy, and a sociopolitical phenomenon that attracted Koreans across class, age, gender, and geographical boundaries. High and low, commoners and slaves, men and probably women, too, were interested in improving their lives by following its

doctrine and practices. As the antithesis of the elite Seoul Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, Tonghak incorporated a high level of religious pluralism inspired by intellectual curiosity found in the country.<sup>19</sup> The tenacity of Catholicism, the popularity of cults of Amitabha and mountain gods, and support of Buddhism among the elite and commoners are just a few examples that attest to widespread interest in religious expression.<sup>20</sup> The mobility of Tonghak leadership around the southern part of the peninsula is indicative of this fervor. Ch'oe and some of his followers traveled throughout the southern provinces with relative ease, sometimes over great distances, which facilitated the movement of his religious teachings and his reputation. The rapid spread of his rituals and personal renown suggest the permeability of Chosŏn dynasty regional and class boundaries. The physical movement of his ideas across the landscape and between classes mirrors the intellectual range of his doctrine, which covered diverse subjects from orthodox Neo-Confucianism to heterodox Buddhist and Daoist works—some composed in literary Chinese, the script of the educated, and others in vernacular Korean in a regional dialect that all classes could read. Some of his works were written as philosophical tracts, some as classical poetry, and others as vernacular song. Scholars based in the capital were generally unable to draw on such background in their own works, whereas Ch'oe could explore novel doctrines and sought alternative solutions to the problems of his era.

Tonghak attracts scholars from a wide variety of fields, and the religion has amassed an immense amount of scholarly and popular literature. The scholarship falls roughly into three trends: that with a nationalist framework, or that with an emphasis on either politics or popular religion. Because of its involvement in the 1894 uprising and the Sino-Japanese War, Tonghak is more often considered as a political phenomenon than a faith with modest roots. The small number of academics in Korea who counter this tendency by focusing on Ch'oe Cheu and his doctrinal writings do not reach a wider audience.<sup>21</sup> The reformulation of Tonghak by writers within the Ch'öndogyo church of the twentieth century contributed to keeping Tonghak and Ch'öndogyo on the bookshelves and in the public eye. However, the claims they prioritize have to be carefully scrutinized, because they were written with the definite aim of strengthening the reputation of Ch'oe Cheu and Tonghak, and they often reflect the contemporary church's agenda to proselytize the Ch'öndogyo faith.<sup>22</sup>

In approaching Tonghak, contemporary scholars have largely adhered to the paradigm of nationalist historiography (*minjok sahak*), overstating the goals of Tonghak and rewriting the intentions of its founder by framing Tonghak as a movement (*undong*) to protect the country and pre-

serve the people (*poguk anmin*) by challenging foreign powers and seeking the overthrow of the Chosŏn dynasty to establish a new and egalitarian society.<sup>23</sup> In this narrative, Tonghak becomes a modern nationalist religion (*kŭndae minjokchŏk chonggyo*) based on popular opposition to Catholicism, the West, and Japan. While stressing the nativist elements of Tonghak, Ch'oe's thought is depicted as revolutionary for empowering the underrepresented in society and as devoted to overthrowing a repressive government led by a corrupt and selfish royal family.<sup>24</sup> North Korean historiography on Tonghak mirrors the South Korean nationalist interpretation while it underscores the antifeign and "anti-feudal" nature of Ch'oe's intentions and the 1894 uprising.<sup>25</sup> In such studies, too frequently the fallacy is made of projecting the events of the 1890s, which *were* political, back onto the religion's foundation, a time when the political aspects were faint. As a consequence, the suggestion is that Tonghak was a reactionary political force from its inception, predisposed to a violent collision with the government, defending popular views and expressing nationalism.<sup>26</sup>

By situating Tonghak within a nationalist movement of resistance—as a reaction against the Chosŏn class system and Western presence in East Asia—Ch'oe and those who studied his teachings are overly politicized, while his religious message and the role of his spiritual adherents are downplayed. This also oversimplifies the government decision to execute him in 1864. When scholars insist upon Tonghak's role in contesting politics, Tonghak practitioners lose individual agency, becoming capable only of responding to government actions.<sup>27</sup> The emphasis on a national trajectory allows the nation to overshadow the individual believer and his or her intentions. Although religion and politics do enmesh, by stressing Tonghak's political aspects, especially in its early period, scholars are suggesting an overtly nationalist motive on the part of Ch'oe and his followers to the detriment of other narratives.

Finally, a third branch of Tonghak scholarship frames it as a popular religion, an amalgamation of practices for the salvation of the masses.<sup>28</sup> Many influences are understood to have informed Ch'oe's understanding of God, from varying degrees of Daoist and Buddhist influence on rituals and Confucian concepts of the Lord-on-High and the Daoist Jade Emperor to Catholicism, shamanism, and other folk beliefs.<sup>29</sup> Embedded within this scholarship is a desire to represent the subaltern of Korean society, the peasants, slaves, and women who could not "speak" for themselves because they did not leave any written documents. Whether emphasizing Buddhism, shamanism, geomancy, the Tan'gun myth, the worship of spirits, the use of talismans for longevity, popular folk practices of Daoist origins, the influence of such populist works as Ch'amwisŏl and

Ch'onggamnok on the formation of Ch'oe's talisman, or Tonghak's millennial attributes, the plethora of references allows for a range of interpretations.<sup>30</sup> These identify how Ch'oe drew upon a variety of doctrinal traditions but obfuscate the impact of his education, Confucian worldview, and attention to marginalized Confucian works, such as Wang Yangming's critique of Zhu Xi.<sup>31</sup> Finally, these works suggest that popular religious beliefs were grounded in a traditional mistrust of the government among the peasants.<sup>32</sup>

These debates and revisions attest to a deep interest in Tonghak and its significance to the early modern era that is not matched in English-language studies. The foundational study of Tonghak, Benjamin Weems's *Reform, Rebellion and the Heavenly Way* (1964), recognizes Tonghak's purely religious origins but succumbs to political determinism, opining that early on it "acquired a strongly political tone" and that "it is in the field of political thought and action... that the movement made its principal impact."<sup>33</sup> Other studies reiterate terms of debates found in Korean scholarship correlating Tonghak with nationalism and modernity, explaining the inspiration for the 1894 uprising and leadership roles within it or considering certain Tonghak religious expressions as advocating a shift away from rigid class hierarchy toward egalitarian notions found within traditions of Confucian populism.<sup>34</sup> Weems's work is informative, useful, and concise, as it iterates how early Tonghak liberated Koreans from oppression and economic hardship by promising salvation.<sup>35</sup> Yet he credits part of the popularity of Tonghak to Koreans' "superstitious nature," which attracted Koreans to its religious rituals, while his depiction of Tonghak activities from 1865 through the 1890s presents the clash with the government as inevitable.<sup>36</sup>

This book expands the scope of English-language studies and incorporates debates of Korean and Anglo historiography. It situates Tonghak in a broader social and religious milieu of the nineteenth century, particularly by contextualizing Tonghak within the ongoing Chos'ŏn struggle with the Catholics and Korea's relationship with China. Second, it approaches Tonghak beliefs by addressing such rituals as the Daoist healing qualities, recognizing their adaptation by later leaders. This study locates early interest in Tonghak in the healing promises of its ritual while downplaying the prevalence of nationalism. The popularity of the talisman and Tonghak eclecticism is explained in recognition of how awash Korea was with religious rituals and practices at the time. As Donald Baker argues, the average Korean did not ascribe to any religious label but lived in a religious landscape in which various practices and rituals intermingled.<sup>37</sup> These "pluralistic" practices imply a blending of nondoctrinal and doctri-

nal traditions in the religious landscape. Finally, given the significance of the rebellion, the book examines the events of the 1890s in the hope of contributing to a better understanding of Tonghak's complex involvement in the movement. In doing so, it problematizes the impact of the religious message of inspiration in the uprising.

This study elaborates on a number of overlooked elements of Tonghak thought and practice. It demonstrates that one important aspect of Tonghak beliefs was that it reinforced family bonds, specifically husband-wife and parent-child bonds, and protected the family and Tonghak community, or those who practiced Ch'oe's teachings, from some of the social and political changes taking place in Korea. In an attempt to resolve issues that he confronted in his own life, Ch'oe sought ways to overcome the breakdown of these bonds by creating images, rituals, and texts. Rather than hope to establish a new order, this study argues, Ch'oe sought to restore society. Tonghak expressions such as "cultivate one's heart and correct one's life force" (*susim chǒnggi*) and "serve God" (*sich'ŏnju*) provided followers with ways to improve their lives and families, as Tonghak ritual promoted social cohesion within the community in the face of contemporary problems.<sup>38</sup> Following Ch'oe's death, such rituals transformed under subsequent leaders as Tonghak's plurality facilitated the process of adapting the faith for practitioners to assist people in overcoming the disruption caused by new social, economic, and political contestations.<sup>39</sup>

Ch'oe found solutions to his problems in a religious message that mixed personal healing and salvation with the welfare of the community. His ideas resonated with many around him, addressing immediate concerns or offering reassurance in an era of international tension when the West appeared ready to invade. The experiences of early Tonghak believers were distinct from those of later followers, who found inspiration in Ch'oe's message but grafted onto it contemporary political and social meanings or twentieth-century readings of Ch'oe and his ideas that became important to nation-building strategies in both North and South Korea. Ch'oe wrote and spoke about faith and religious practice, but he was also concerned about the spiritual and military threat from Catholicism and the West. While connected, this worldview was based in late Chosŏn concepts of country and society that proved amenable to modern ideas of nationhood, nationalism, and class consciousness. In the early years, Ch'oe's message was personal as he wrote about himself and his father to help his wife, children, and the people of Kyŏngju understand his actions. It is true that his works were potentially subversive, in that they contained subtle arguments about how the country should resolve its problems – arguments that undermined the legitimacy of the government

and the foundation of the kingdom. For Ch'oe, the answer rested in personal faith, as well as a gradual realignment inward toward Kyōngju that was inspired by Korea's ancient past. In other words, early Tonghak demonstrated Ch'oe's concern for a faith-based rural community that could help the people around him and ultimately restore the country.

### **Religion, Nationalism, and Modernity**

In Benedict Anderson's studies, nationalist consciousness is accompanied by a secular modernity wherein religion is excluded from the public sphere.<sup>40</sup> For Anderson, religion declines in importance in direct relationship to the rise of nationalism. Yet the example of Tonghak indicates that presumption of a rational, scientific, and Enlightenment basis for the modern nation-state poses a series of dichotomies that obscure how religion fueled the nationalist project.<sup>41</sup> During the heydays of nationalism throughout much of the West, religious institutions actively sought to maintain an ideological presence in the public sphere. As Hefner states, "The consequence was not the evacuation of religion from public life, but . . . a potent mix of pluralization and heightened competition."<sup>42</sup> Much of the process of modernization entailed the use of religion to "make politics into a religious obligation" that equated the nation with the divine.<sup>43</sup>

In his important study on the intersection of religion and nationalism, Peter van der Veer argues that religious discourse, practices, and rituals in modern India should be viewed as representative of the changing nature of social identity rather than "ideological smoke screens that hide the real clash of material interests and social classes."<sup>44</sup> Building upon Anderson's link of print-capitalism and nationhood, Veer proposes that religious symbols—particularly what he calls "ritual communication"—provide a sense of shared collective identity that builds community. Rituals create the means to construct an identity of the self and the other, and creating boundaries through which the community can protect and sustain itself, and these communities, in turn, can lead to religious nationalism when they align with the nation.<sup>45</sup> For instance, elites in Oman identified as Arab despite living on the periphery, because they shared religion and a sense of history.<sup>46</sup> Juergensmeyer sees this phenomenon as being composed of the two distinct trends of ethnic religious nationalism, which equates a religious community with a shared sense of identity to a specific geographical territory, and ideological religious nationalism, which politicizes religion to support specific political goals.<sup>47</sup> Recently, scholarship has diverged on the question whether individuals can identify with

multiple religious communities within a religiously pluralistic society or on the balance between religion and nation.<sup>48</sup>

As strong sites of authority, states and religious institutions share certain structures, such as a common sense of collective order and a desire to regulate aspects of life by relying on a central text (whether a constitution, a set of civil laws, or a holy book) or all-powerful images (such as the national flag or God). Premodern states controlled religious power and suppressed heterodoxy much in the same way that modern states try to regulate the social power of religious institutions. This was true of Korea's Chosŏn dynasty and its approach to Neo-Confucianism. Within its own system, Neo-Confucianism was scientific and rational, with well-articulated concepts of the national polity, but it also had a religious component, as its ritual informed identity and Chosŏn dynasty statecraft.<sup>49</sup> Ruling elites upheld orthodoxy, suppressed other forms of public religion, and controlled access to learning.<sup>50</sup> In many ways, state-controlled orthodoxy in countries such as Korea corresponded to a particular sense of the nation, while religious activity outside orthodoxy, whether Buddhism, folk practices, Catholicism, or Tonghak, survived in informal social structures to avoid competing with the state's control of the public sphere.

Religion played a key role in nation building within the context of Korea's experience with colonialism. Unlike later Ch'ŏndogyo, early Tonghak was not an institution that prohibited the individual from identifying with other religious practices, nor did it articulate a specific nationalist agenda; rather, it consisted of a diffused network of followers who believed in the sacred powers of a magical talisman and other religious rituals and practices. Tonghak practice did not demand the renunciation of other doctrines, nor did followers have to swear allegiance. At its beginning, Tonghak lacked institutional structures, and it had no clear headquarters, sites of permanent worship, governing structure, maintenance of membership rolls, or real bureaucracy. Its structure consisted of a handful of assembly leaders under Ch'oe Cheu who were inspired by his commitment to spread his ideas and written doctrine. Perhaps it was patriotic, but the early religion cannot be reduced to a nationalist movement merely because Ch'oe opposed the West. Granted, Tonghak belief transformed into ideological religious nationalism in the early twentieth century, at least for certain former Tonghak leaders shortly after the signing of the Japanese Protectorate Treaty in 1905 and the annexation in 1910. Other religions did much the same by constructing strong institutional structures (schools and newspapers, for instance) to educate the public regarding what the Korean nation should become while working within the context of colonialism.<sup>51</sup> This transformation was inspired by the defeat of China

in 1895, the decline of the Sinic order, and the arrival of Japanese imperialism from 1905, compelling groups such as Ch'ondogyo to foster a stronger sense of a modern nation by using Ch'oe's doctrine as a rallying point.

At its origins, Tonghak was not a nationwide movement. Ch'oe was writing about a new way for people, especially those around him in the countryside, to help themselves without the assistance of the central government or other support networks. Part of that process involved giving them a sense of rural pride to replace their notion of being peripheral to the capital. In the emerging worldview of early Tonghak, while China was still important in terms of its classical past, it no longer represented the center of the civilized world. Associated with declining Sinic importance, the Seoul-based government could no longer comfort the people, so non-state actors such as Ch'oe had to step forward. His early concerns were regional rather than national, and they were family-oriented rather than focused on the state.

In subsequent generations, Tonghak became part of Korea's narrative of modernity, as some leaders advocated social reforms to improve the lives of the common people in the 1890s by stimulating class consciousness and empowering less-educated followers through the dissemination of religious texts in vernacular Korean. This spoke to surges in vernacular writing and publishing in the late Chosŏn dynasty. Christian missionaries in Korea have also been viewed as harbingers of modernity through the publication of vernacular materials.<sup>52</sup> Ironically, despite appealing to the masses, Tonghak doctrine maintained elite biases, as most of the religious works were written in literary Chinese, which most of the population could not read or would at the very least have had trouble understanding.

Tonghak was mobilized as a defensive ideology responding to the threat from abroad to protect the country.<sup>53</sup> Yet this transformation was the product of new geopolitical realities of the 1890s. In the 1860s, the anti-foreign discourse reflected domestic schisms, as fear of foreigners could help the government rally the country to support its policies. Ch'oe's anti-Western language reflected such elite scorn and fear of the masses. By attacking Catholicism and generating anxiety about the West, the government gained rural loyalty. While Ch'oe's language reflected such hierarchies of late Chosŏn Neo-Confucian social thought, these concerns formed only one aspect of his teaching.

This study also places Tonghak in local, national, and regional contexts while also explicating the religious nature of Ch'oe's teaching. Chapter 1 begins on the regional level, showing how Tonghak was one example of a wider pattern of contestation in East Asia, where peripheral

groups challenged the center through religion and unsanctioned doctrines. From the point of view of governments and conservative Neo-Confucians, other religions were a constant problem, but despite heavy control and severe punishment, unsanctioned beliefs continued to attract practitioners throughout East Asia. Chapters 2 and 3 examine the doctrinal writings of Ch'oe Cheu to discuss intellectual and religious history and the impact of Ch'oe's thought on Korea. Tonghak arose amid Korea's social, economic, and political changes of the mid-nineteenth century, which included the country's complex relationship with Catholicism. These chapters focus in part on writings from 1860 through 1863 to explain how personal and family crises spurred Ch'oe to formulate a system of beliefs to improve his own health and harmonize his family relations, which he then applied to the lives of others around him until the central government intervened in late 1863.

The reimagining of Ch'oe's message, which allowed his teaching to survive his execution, is the subject of chapter 4. Beginning in the late 1860s, the government grew distracted by Western Catholic missionaries and French and American military incursions on Korea's shores, giving Tonghak followers an opportunity to consolidate their nebulous community. Leaders such as Ch'oe Sihyöng (1827–1898) collected Ch'oe's writings for the first time and began composing new texts and doctrine to counter the government's portrayal of Ch'oe as a criminal. In these works, Ch'oe became a messianic figure who could raise people from the dead and perform other supernatural acts. This chapter ends with how the large-scale Tonghak uprising threatened the central government, created a negative image of the religion, and was seized as an opportunity to depict disorder and government weakness, an excuse for foreign intervention.

Chapter 5 examines the aftermath of 1894 through the case of Son Pyönghui (1861–1922), the third leader of Tonghak and the founder of Ch'öndogyo, to demonstrate how followers struggled to control the public perception of the community. With the demise of China as Korea's symbolic and cultural touchstone, the Neo-Confucian concept of stability lost its viability. Japanese imperialism took China's place, and Korean elites began to search for new ways to shore up Korea's eroding national sovereignty. Tonghak followers were involved in this debate about national identity. The failure of the Tonghak uprising and the increasing foreign involvement in Korea between 1894 and 1905 led Son and others to reframe the Tonghak religious message by constructing a bureaucratized institution in Seoul that rejected certain elements of the Tonghak past while embracing Ch'oe Cheu and his doctrine. This shift succeeded in popularizing a newly revamped Tonghak teaching; it also laid the foundation

for Ch'öndogyo's participation in religious nationalist projects during the colonial era (1910–1945).

### Researching the Tonghak Past

Few primary sources are available on Tonghak before the 1890s. Extant sources include the 1860–1863 works of Ch'oe Cheu, which were reconstructed from memory in 1880 after the originals were lost to fire, and Tonghak-Ch'öndogyo bibliographies and histories written after his execution.<sup>54</sup> Biographical information is gleaned from passages in his nineteenth-century *Eastern Scripture* (Tonggyöng taejön) and *Songs of Yongdam* (Yongdam yusa), late nineteenth-century histories of Tonghak such as the *Biographical Record of Suun* (Suun haengnok) and *Account of the Origin of the Way* (Towön kisö), and early twentieth-century Ch'öndogyo religious collections.<sup>55</sup> The earliest extant copies of *Eastern Scripture* and *Songs of Yongdam* date to 1883. O Chiyöng's (1868–1950) *History of Tonghak* (Tonghaksa), which relies on many of these as sources, is considered an important resource on Ch'oe and the Tonghak-Ch'öndogyo religion, although its reliability is not unquestioned.<sup>56</sup> The original was published in 1940 as a historical novel (*yöksa sosöl*) in Sino-Korean script, but the work is available today through reprints in mixed-script and vernacular Korean.

Government and elite attacks on Tonghak and its later exoneration to cleanse Ch'oe's record offer contradictory perspectives. As such, Tonghak-Ch'öndogyo sources are placed in dialogue with government documents. Descriptions of the arrest, interrogation, and execution of Ch'oe Cheu and other Tonghak followers are found in several government compilations.<sup>57</sup> These sources all contain similar descriptions of the events, and some were probably used in the compilation of the *Kojong Sunjong sillok* accounts, which date to the period 1929–1935.<sup>58</sup> Sadly, the large number of commoners who followed Tonghak teaching in the nineteenth century did not leave behind any written accounts. Government interrogations of followers document the actions and sayings of a few early believers arrested with Ch'oe in 1863, but because the content of such records was obtained under torture, they must be read with caution.

Chapters 4 and 5 make limited use of church materials to reconstruct the period between 1864 and the early 1890s, though these records were compiled later and are often speculative. Even the original dates of Tonghak sources can be difficult to determine, as are the number of followers Tonghak attracted. Church histories claim that during the years immediately after Ch'oe's death, the religion remained active throughout the

country as the leadership went into hiding. It is possible that the church sources exaggerate the number of believers to legitimize Ch'ōndogyo as the twentieth-century heir to a nationwide popular religion. But members may indeed have continued to practice discreetly as the central government turned its attentions elsewhere. Church sources are relevant to the telling of Tonghak history because they fill in the gaps in knowledge from the government sources and, more importantly, reveal the concerns of Tonghak writers.

In contrast to the earlier period, there was an explosion of written materials from 1893 occasioned by the political ramifications of the dramatic Tonghak demonstrations demanding the exoneration and rehabilitation of the Tonghak founder.<sup>59</sup> These voluminous collections are instructive about the government's view and responses to the uprising, and they may be supplemented by numerous eyewitness accounts of the rebellion, Tonghak petitions and pamphlets from 1894, and elite reports and diary accounts of the rebellion.<sup>60</sup> While each is colored by the perspective of its author, taken together they provide a sweeping view of the events.

I do not claim to have all the answers about Ch'oe Cheu or Tonghak. Given the complexity of the primary sources and the ambiguity in much of his writings and the works of subsequent leaders, it is difficult to fully understand the intensions of Ch'oe, while the dearth of primary sources from the ordinary people who practiced Tonghak prevents us from telling the full story. Partly this study seeks to illuminate an important period of early modern Korean history that has been subsumed under the nationalist umbrella. The translations at the end of the book, which include the *Eastern Scripture*; several works by the second leader, Ch'oe Sihyōng; petitions to the government from the early 1890s; and much of the non-doctrinal biography on Ch'oe and early Tonghak, suggest the complexity and nature of Tonghak thought. The selections from the second leader provide readers with a chance to compare developments between different Tonghak periods, including the push to write women into the religious community, while the biography narrates the Tonghak side of the story, depicting a community struggling to prove its legitimacy against an antagonistic government. These works reveal that whereas some of Ch'oe Cheu's ideas were religious, others were philosophical and literary. Apart from the innovative religious concepts, what emerges from the *Eastern Scripture* is Ch'oe's eclecticism as he quoted, alluded to, or simply borrowed word for word from well-known and widely circulated texts, including *Analects*, *Mencius*, *Yi Jing*, popular Daoist works, classical Chinese poetry by Tao Yuanming (365–427), the Chinese *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (Sanguo yanyi), and the Ming dynasty-era Buddhist morality

tale *Journey to the West* (Xi you ji), among many others. Such eclecticism speaks to the level of Ch'oe's knowledge and provides a snapshot of the concerns of a marginalized scholar from late Chosŏn dynasty Korea.

Finally, this book follows the McCune-Reischauer system of romanization. For important expressions that appear in the text and primary sources, literary Chinese equivalents have been provided in the glossary. Dates remain true to the sources expressed in the lunar calendar, with the solar equivalent in parentheses.