

Introduction

In the spring of 1894, a disparate band of peasant farmers, religious devotees and disenfranchised landed gentry assembled under the leadership of Confucian scholar-turned-general Jeon Bong-jun and, inspired by an emerging native creed and fueled by deep-seated grievances which had been ignored by Korean authorities at all levels of government for decades, they inflicted a succession of heavy defeats on the Joseon dynasty military. By 31 May 1894, the Donghaks¹—as they were known—had captured Jeonju, the capital of Jeolla Province, just 200 kilometers south of Seoul. They resisted all counterattacks by government forces under the leadership of General Hong Kyaе-hun and seemed entirely capable of marching on the capital and of toppling what they considered to be a corrupt and immoral administration.

The peasant army, which had grown in size and confidence as it marched north, halted at Jeonju of its own volition. Its leaders, out of deference to King Kojong, if not for the bickering, manipulative officials who surrounded him, agreed to meet with General Hong. With the king's approval, the general offered a temporary peace settlement to the rebels as a delaying ploy, while the monarch urgently petitioned China for military assistance. China responded by sending troops to Korea on 5 June 1894. Japan, which had developed its own plans for the Korean peninsula, not wishing to be outmaneuvered by China in an escalating game of brinkmanship, immediately dispatched troops to Korea as well. Quite suddenly, Korea became the potential flashpoint of a regional conflict with major international implications.

Where and how did this peasant rebellion—which hovered on the brink of toppling the centuries-old Joseon dynasty and of bringing the region's dominant powers to war—begin? What ideals, vision, and creed inspired and directed a large section of the populace which, to this point in history, had had difficulty in organizing and sustaining even local rebellions for any length of time? In whose mind did the seeds of this movement germinate? And what particular circumstances nurtured them to fruition?

To answer these questions one must journey back almost half a century, to a mountain retreat near the ancient Silla dynasty capital of Gyeongju, and even further back, into the life of a man who sought a new 'Way' to lead him and his followers through the tumultuous times into which they were born. He sought a healing path. That his teachings and his vision inspired a revolution which had a

¹ The name means 'Eastern Learning'. The name of was changed to 'Cheondo-gyo' ('the Religion of the Heavenly Way') by the third leader of the religion, Son Byeong-hi, in 1905.

formative effect in changing the geo-political structures of Northeast Asia would no doubt have astonished him. He was a peaceful man.

This man is known to history as Choe Che-u. As the name Choe recurs frequently in this work as the surname of a number of individuals, Choe Che-u will subsequently be referred to simply as Su-un,² a name bestowed on him by his followers.

The present book will attempt to discern the very essence of this man Su-un. That is, of the manner in which he envisioned himself as he sought a solution, or more accurately a 'Way' which would give hope and sustenance to the Korean people as they faced impending invasion by colonizing forces and, particularly, to the masses at the bottom of the societal pyramid, which were subjected to increasing and systemic governmental negligence and abuse.

Why is an attempt to define Su-un's self-image an important task?

Firstly, it is important because Su-un was a religious innovator and the founder of Korea's first indigenous religion—that is, the first of a large number of syncretic religions and sects which flourished in the oppressive times marking the end of the Jeosun dynasty and of the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula. Many of these religions survive today.

As a religious innovator, Su-un became the prototype for the founders of Korea's many new religions and religious movements. It has been stated that 'All new religions in Korea are consciously or unconsciously patterned after Donghak'.³ Consequently it is of considerable importance, from the perspective of religious leadership in general and in East Asia and Korea in particular, that Su-un's self-image as a religious leader should be determined as accurately as possible. For, as Su-un's concept of himself as a religious leader evolved, so too did the image of a new style of religious leadership which, in time, would cast its influence on the leaders of the new religious movements who followed him. This study is important because of its religious relevance to Korea and Northeast Asia.

Secondly, Su-un was born into a time when Korea was embroiled in the most dire social and political turmoil, both internally and externally. Internecine struggles for power among the ruling classes blinded them to catastrophic events unfolding in the neighbouring countries of China and Japan, which foreshadowed similar occurrences in Korea. Endemic corruption, characteristic of a dynasty in decay, caused unrest to ferment among the underprivileged and disenfranchised

² Meaning 'Watercloud'.

³ Cho Hung-yun, 'New Religions', in *Religions in Korea* (Seoul: Korea Overseas Information Service 1986), p. 108. Donghak is described by Benjamin B. Weems as 'the oldest of Korea's "new" religions' ('Chondo-gyo Enters Its Second Century', *Transactions* (Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch), vol. 43, 1968 p. 92); and by James Huntley Grayson as Korea's 'first syncretic religion' (*Korea: A Religious History*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 234). H Byron Earhart describes Donghak/Cheondo-gyo as 'the major pioneer of new religious movements' ('The New Religions of Korea: A Preliminary Interpretation', *Transactions*, vol. 49, 1974, p. 19).

lower classes and brought the country to the brink of widespread rebellion. All of these forces influenced Su-un and helped shape his destiny—a destiny which would not only change the lives of his followers, but would also impact on the lives of his fellow countrymen: one way or another, all would be affected by Donghak and by the rebellion it inspired. Su-un’s Way and the rebellion which, inadvertently or otherwise, sprang from it had a formative effect on the reshaping of the geo-political structure of the area. Thus this study is important for its social and political relevance to Northeast Asia.

The third reason for attempting to define Su-un’s self-image is that a textual study of Su-un’s concept of himself, based on his scriptures and on the two symbols he used to proclaim and propagate his religion, has not been attempted. This book aims to fill this lacuna in the religious history of Korea.

Su-un was a visionary, a charismatic individual whose eclectic and counter-cultural religious principles had a transforming effect on society and politics within, and also well beyond, the boundaries of his own country. This book, however, does not attempt to cover at any depth historical, societal and political events which followed Su-un’s death, and registers those which preceded his ecstatic experience on Mt Gumi in the spring of 1860 inasmuch as they had a direct bearing on Su-un, his family and his lineage. My primary goal here is to examine Su-un’s scriptures and symbols in order to postulate a self-image of Su-un in the final days of his life. In doing so, I attempt to lay a sound foundation for understanding not only Su-un and the religion he founded, but the reasons for the growth of this religion and for the flowering of other new religious movements which followed Donghak. A sound foundation is, after all, a necessary, if not an essential, part of any viable structure.

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When I arrived in Seoul in August 1984, an expatriate who had lived and worked in South Korea for over twenty-five years offered me the following advice:

If you wish to learn about Korea, its people, history, language, culture, society, religions and traditions, don’t just read books about them. Rather pick one person or one event, and study this person or event in as much depth as possible. By doing so you will accumulate knowledge not only about this person or event, but about the way Koreans think and act and live. Your knowledge will be like a tiny snowball that rolls from the top to the bottom of a steep hill, growing all the time.

And, most importantly, live with the people and learn from them.

My wish is that, having followed his advice to the best of my ability, I should now be able to accompany the readers of this book on a journey across time and cultures, to meet and to attempt to understand one fascinating and complex individual who lived in a fascinating and complex land, at a crucial time in that land’s history. In

my opinion, it is a project worth undertaking, as the journey leads not only into Korea, the land, the people, and their culture but into the heart and mind of one person who resides within all these.

The journey may not end there. It may very well lead also into the depths of one's own heart and mind. And, as with Su-un, who knows what mysteries await discovery there?