

# Cheondogyo and the Donghak Revolution: *The (un)Making of a Religion*

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## Abstract

*This paper explores the reasons why Cheondogyo is lionized in contemporary nationalist discourse, when it has such a small following in South Korea today. I argue that Cheondogyo's continuing presence in nationalist and tourist publications can be readily comprehended in light of its connection with the Donghak Revolution of 1894.*

*In the post-colonial era, Donghak/Cheondogyo was embraced by both the North and South Korean states, each seeking to claim a connection with the movement in order to legitimize their respective political goals. More recently, this legacy has also been claimed by the minjung movement as evidence of an incipient minjung consciousness.*

*These political appropriations have ensured that Cheondogyo maintains a level of legitimacy denied to other new religions of Korea. However, the political acceptance of Donghak/Cheondogyo has come at the expense of its religious legitimacy. Thus, while its connection with the Donghak Revolution may have "made" Cheondogyo into a key historical artifact, it has simultaneously been "unmade" as a religious movement with any real relevance to the present.*

**Keywords:** Donghak Revolution, Peasant War of 1894, Cheondogyo, new religious movements, historical appropriations

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## Introduction

In 1998 I traveled to Seoul to conduct ethnographic field research on Cheondogyo (Religion of the Heavenly Way)—one of Korea's many new religious movements. Having spent the previous year immersed in library research on the religion, I was convinced of Cheondogyo's centrality to Korean religious life. This impression had been formed early on, in part because every major government-sponsored publication invariably includes Cheondogyo as one of Korea's key religions, along with Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam.<sup>1</sup> However, before I had even set foot on Korean soil, my assumptions were rudely shaken. On the airplane ride from Cairns to Seoul, I was somewhat disconcerted to learn that my friendly Korean neighbor, Mr. Kim, had not heard of Cheondogyo. Little did I realize that this initial discussion was to become the prototype for many conversations that followed.

Mr. Kim: so why are you visiting Korea?

I: to study Cheondogyo.

Mr. Kim: (look of blank incomprehension) er... Cheonjugyo  
(Catholicism)?

I: no, Cheondogyo—Donghak.

Mr. Kim: ah, Donghak—the Donghak Revolution (*hyeongmyeong*).

I didn't realize it still existed.

Upon arriving in Korea, I quickly discovered that Mr. Kim was not alone in his ignorance of Cheondogyo; the majority of people I met were unfamiliar with the religion. This subsequently raised a number of questions about why Cheondogyo is accorded such a prominent place in state discourses on Korean religion when most Koreans have not even heard of it.

Today the bulk of South Korea's religious population is either Christian or Buddhist. Considerably less than one percent of the pop-

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1. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism's website ([www.mct.go.kr](http://www.mct.go.kr)) is a good example.

ulation affiliate themselves with Cheondogyo, government figures placing Cheondogyo's membership at about 26,000 (Office of Religious Affairs 1998, 7). Clearly then, the religion presently has an incredibly small following in South Korea. Another factor that would seem to conflict with Cheondogyo's prominence in state discourses is the general attitude towards new religious movements in the country. Such religions tend to have an unsavory reputation, and have been the focus of considerable press—much of it negative. This general hostility towards new religions makes the political acceptance of Cheondogyo even more anomalous.

This special approbation cannot be explained by any particular doctrinal appeal that Cheondogyo holds for the Korean public. In its basic philosophy Cheondogyo is not too dissimilar from other new religions in the country, which tend to take the form of revitalization movements that focus on the imminent creation of a heavenly paradise on earth. Furthermore, some of these other new religions are actually much larger than Cheondogyo (eg. Won Buddhism); others are certainly more nationalistic (eg. Daejonggyo); others still have a much larger international following (eg. the Unification Church).

In this paper I aim to explore the reasons for Cheondogyo's lionization in state and nationalist discourses. I also intend to examine the effects that this state recognition has had on the religion itself. Considering the present decline in Cheondogyo's membership and the general lack of awareness regarding the religion, the question can be raised as to whether this official endorsement has been beneficial or detrimental to the religion.

## **Cheondogyo: Background and History**

Cheondogyo is the orthodox form of Donghak—a religious revitalization movement founded on 5 April 1860 when a man named Choe Je-u fell into a trance and experienced a revelation compelling him to spread a message of spiritual enlightenment throughout Korea. Donghak envisioned a new world order based on human equality: a theme

later formalized in the doctrine of *innaecheon* (humans are Heaven), which has become the central tenet of the religion's theology today. Despite the early martyrdom of its founder and ongoing persecution by the government, many of the *sangmin* (commoners) were attracted to Donghak during the subsequent decades (Weems 1964, 7-14). Following a name change in 1905 to Cheondogyo, the religion continued to gain converts, spearheading the March First Independence Movement of 1919 against the Japanese colonial regime. However, since its peak around this period, Cheondogyo has experienced a steady decline and only a small number of adherents remain in the twenty-first century.

I believe that the continuing presence of Cheondogyo in nationalist literature and tourist publications can be readily comprehended in light of its involvement in a series of uprisings that took place in 1894. These uprisings are often represented as the single most important political event in the modern history of Korea: largely because they resulted in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895. Indeed, as early as 1895 commentators noted that the Donghak Revolution became the match which ignited relations between China and Japan (Junkin 1895, 56). In hindsight the movement occurred at a pivotal moment in Korea's history, setting off a chain of events that ultimately culminated in the Japanese colonial domination of the country. Countless scholars have documented not only the rebellion's religious origins, but also its nationalistic character. Indeed, it seems clear that the Donghak Revolution has become an important means of demonstrating the existence of Korean nationalism and patriotism at a time when the country's autonomy was threatened by Japanese imperialism. The movement has been enshrined in nationalist discourse as symbolizing the birth of modern Korean nationalism; and it is here that Cheondogyo's contemporary recognition starts to make sense.

### **The Donghak Revolution in Focus**

The Donghak Revolution occurred at a time when Korea was on the

verge of undergoing radical transformations—in many respects the revolution actually helped to precipitate these transformations. Internally, Korean society was stagnating under a rigid Confucian social hierarchy, which saw destitute peasants overtaxed and generally ill-used by corrupt government officials and the gentry class (*yangban*). External forces, such as the inexorable Western encroachment into the East, were also causing considerable alarm in Korea at this time.

On 19 February 1894, in response to continued economic abuses by the *yangban* and government officials, a Donghak adherent named Jeon Bong-jun led a popular revolt against the district authorities in the Gobu county of Jeolla-do province. This uprising quickly erupted into a large-scale rebellion that eventually spread throughout the whole province (Weems 1964, 37-41). Alarmed by the success of the uprisings and the obvious support they engendered, the Korean government called for Chinese intervention. This move was to have unforeseeably fatal consequences, as Korea's action in requesting Chinese support prompted the Japanese government to dispatch troops to Korea<sup>2</sup> (Cho 1994, 45). With the arrival of the Japanese, the rebellion flared anew. Nevertheless, the Japanese army eventually defeated the rebels and executed the leaders of the movement; Donghak adherents across the country were dealt harsh retribution for their suspected role in the uprising (Oliver 1993, 67). During this period, tensions between the Chinese and Japanese troops mounted. Japan demanded that the Korean government order Chinese troops to leave, while Japanese officials announced they would maintain their presence in Korea to help the country sort out its messy domestic affairs. Relations between China and Japan deteriorated rapidly, leading to the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 and culminating in the creation of a Japanese protectorate in Korea in 1905. This was, of course, followed by Korea's annexation to Japan in

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2. Although precedent for such an action had been set in the form of the Tianjin Convention of 1885, the Japanese removal of troops to Korea under the aegis of the treaty seems to have been more of a pretext to accomplish the country's expansionist agenda, than the result of any outrage against China's violation of the treaty.

1910, which signaled the onset of 35 years of colonial rule.

This brief description represents the so-called “facts” of the uprising, which are not in dispute. There is general agreement on the dates of the revolution and the basic events that took place. However, there is disagreement on the motivations of the uprising’s leaders and the larger purpose of the movement. It has become apparent that several parties claim ownership of the Donghak Revolution, each trying to establish a connection between their contemporary goals and this historically significant event.

### **Historical Appropriations**

In the post-colonial era, the Donghak Revolution was taken up by both the North and South Korean states. During this period each state desperately needed a means to legitimize its respective regime as the rightful government of the country. They also needed to overcome the national feelings of devastation and hopelessness caused by the Korean War of 1950–1953, the humiliation of Japanese colonialism, and unflattering Western stereotypes regarding the country. Both states quickly realized that the key to stimulating nationalism and economic growth lay in history, and each regime soon produced official nationalisms that legitimized their claim to power. Donghak/Cheondogyo became formally connected with the modernizing and nationalist projects of both these states and in this environment began to take on new politicized meanings.

#### *South Korea and the Donghak Revolution*

In South Korea, it was during the Park Chung-hee era that the Donghak Revolution was systematically taken up as a key political symbol. At this time Korea was still recovering from the debilitating and demoralizing effects of 35 years of colonial rule, and the devastating impact of the Korean War (1950–1953). The Syngman Rhee government had proved to be corrupt and autocratic, and was eventually

overthrown by the April Revolution of 1960. Park seized power through a military coup in the chaotic period that followed, and therefore felt a very real need to establish his government's political legitimacy (Eckert et al. 1990, 360). Under Park's leadership, Korean society began a program of "modernization" marked by rapid economic growth, and dramatic social and political change. Donghak had an important ideological role to play at this time, as the movement provided a central means of demonstrating the existence of an indigenous, democratic, nationalistic, and modern political ideology. Thus, the movement began to take on new politicized meanings in this context as part of a general push to downplay the effects of external forces in shaping Korean culture (cf. Song 1999, 63).

The revolution became a key symbol of the patriotic and creative Korean spirit: an important means of refuting Western stereotypes regarding the country, which had allowed the Western world to endorse the Japanese colonization of Korea in the first place. Indeed, Theodore Roosevelt was especially active in his covert endorsement of Japanese colonialism, and his support ultimately culminated in the Taft-Katsura Agreement of 1905 (Beale 1956, 323). This agreement secretly recognized Japanese suzerainty in Korea in exchange for Japan's recognition of U.S. interests in the Philippines (Harbaugh 1961, 54-55). Donghak became an important rebuttal to Roosevelt's contempt. As one author writes, "Does Korean history really show a complete absence of popular resistance? It seems that the Donghak revolt is a living refutation of such a negative view of Korea as the one held by Roosevelt that the Korean people had never shown the spirit of resistance to their enemies in order to safeguard their own survival" (Shin 1966, 16). In a similar vein, the revolution became a means of demonstrating that the impetus for Korea's modernization was internally realized, rather than the result of Western influence or Japanese colonial rule. Thus Kang (1968, 48) writes,

Until relatively recently, it has been widely thought that the East Asian symbol system is so particularist [sic] and so oriented towards self-negation that rationalization of ends could not be

achieved without Western help. Japan may be taken, perhaps, for an example. . . . Of China, it has been said that she had to adopt a foreign ideology [communism] in order to be modernized. But Tonghak [Donghak] shows the possibility of a traditional symbol system being redefined in such a way that it can conduce toward an open, modern society.

Elsewhere, the rebellion is represented as an indigenous “revitalization” of Korean culture (Kim H. 1980; Chung 1969, 118): a symbolic rebirth with the potential to transform the nation (Hong 1968, 50; Lee N. 1991) forestalled only by Japanese designs on the country (Wells 1990, 8).

Park Chung-hee also used the Donghak Revolution to justify political programs—particularly the state’s core policy of “nationalistic democracy” (*minjokjeok minjujuui*). This policy served as an attempt to establish an indigenous form of democracy that would justify the state’s claim to absolute power over the nation in terms of Korea’s unique social and historical situation. Park thus asserted that “nationalistic democracy” was a form of indigenous democracy that could not be measured by political theories developed in the West (Kim 1994, 201). For the administration, historical precedent for this “nationalistic democracy” had been established through the Donghak Revolution. Park writes,

As a beginning of a pre-modern popular revolution, at the same time it [the Donghak Revolution] represented Korean nationalism against Japan and Western imperialist countries. . . . Principles for the construction of . . . the Revolution included the popular Tonghak philosophy “Man is God” which was the beginning of the Koreanization of democracy. The principles were not directly imported from any Western democracy (1970, 107).

Moreover, Park portrays his military coup as an extension of the “unique” Donghak ideology, handed down to posterity through the March First Independence Movement of 1919, the April Revolution of 1960, and his own “May Military Revolution” (Park 1970).

As I have already noted, official recognition continues to this day, although the state is careful to downplay the antigovernment dimensions of the movement. In a telling anecdote, Song (1999, 158) describes the efforts of villagers in Gongsam, Jeolla-do province, to erect a stone monument to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the Donghak Revolution. He notes that the government, “ . . . initially uneasy about the political symbolism behind the peasant war, . . . persuaded the villagers to drop their plan” (Song 1999, 158). However, when it became apparent that the villagers planned to go ahead with construction anyway, the government co-opted the project and played down the antigovernment aspect of the uprisings.

In South Korean history textbooks, the Donghak Revolution is commemorated for its anti-Japanese legacy (Song 1999, 157) and nationalism. Indeed, Choe Je-u (the founder of Donghak) was designated as a key cultural figure (*munhwa inmul*) by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 1999, along with luminaries such as the painter Sin Yun-bok and the naval commander Yi Sun-sin. According to the brochure published at the time (MCT 1998), this recognition was provided in acknowledgment of Choe’s efforts to establish a reform-oriented and nationalistic social movement.

In academic contexts, Cheondogyo’s indigenous origins and nationalistic ideology are also emphasized and are represented to be Korea’s own indigenous ideological tradition. Kim’s description is typical of the stance generally taken. He writes,

What is Korean thought? Answering this question might involve several traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Shamanism, Christianity, and Ch’ondogyo [Cheondogyo]. However, Ch’ondogyo alone is the major indigenous tradition developed in Korea, while Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity are of foreign origin, and Shamanism is relatively common in many parts of the world (Kim Y. 1989, vii).

Clearly, the ongoing presence of Cheondogyo in national culture in South Korea is intimately entwined with its value as a potent political

and cultural symbol.

### *North Korea and the Proletariat Revolution*

The North Korean state was established under the leadership of Kim Il Sung in 1946. Although his bid for power was sponsored by the Soviet Communists, Kim later broke away from both the Soviet and Chinese Communist camps to forge an independent regime based on the policy of "self-reliance" (*juche*). However, from the regime's inception Kim Il Sung had to contend with the accusation that he was a political "puppet" for the Comintern, which was pulling the strings behind the scenes (allegations still commonplace in South Korea today). The broader Korean Communist movement itself was subject to similar criticisms. Indeed, the intense factionalism that has plagued the history of Korean Communism can be seen as a direct result of the conflict between nationalist concerns and broader loyalties to the international Communist movement (Scalapino and Lee 1972). The Donghak Revolution became an important means of mediating this conflict.

Since 1922 a number of Korean Communists have openly identified with the Donghak Revolution and have attributed the beginnings of Korean Communism to this uprising (Suh 1967, 39; Ahn 2001, 70). According to Petrov (2001, 12), the Communist historian Baek Nam-un ". . . highly praised the merits of Tonghak [sic] (Eastern Learning) religion and stated that the 1894 popular rebellion of the same name was the first successful experience of mobilizing the masses under the banner of ideology." This discourse effectively transforms Korean Communism into an indigenous, nation-wide movement that arose spontaneously in Korea, rather than an alien dogma introduced by foreign powers.

This North Korean perspective also critiques the South Korean government's claim that theirs is the singular ideology of national unification. According to the North, the Korean people supported an indigenous Communist movement—as evidenced by the widespread support for the Donghak Revolution, which becomes a proletariat

uprising against the corrupt and exploitative *yangban*. This helped to support the claim made by the Kim Il Sung regime that the South Korean government had forced its dictates upon the Korean people against their wishes. Through this historical appropriation Donghak has been enshrined within North Korea as symbolizing the origins of an indigenous Communist, nationalistic, and democratic ideology, which developed *internally* in the country, without outside influence.

The importance still placed upon Cheondogyo is demonstrated by the ongoing existence of the Cheondogyo Cheongudang (Cheondogyo Young Friends Party)—one of the three major political parties in North Korea today. Whether this party actually represents the interests of Cheondogyo is irrelevant here; what is important is that the name obviously carries ideological significance in North Korea. As Lankov (2001) points out, it is not difficult to see why the Cheondogyo Young Friends Party was allowed to maintain its existence with the creation of a North Korean state. He notes,

Traditionally Ch'ondogyo [sic] had been a revolutionary, nationalist, antiforeign, and especially anti-Japanese sect which, unlike Christianity, lacked any traditional connections with the West. Ch'ondogyo adherents had played a remarkable role in an 1894 peasant uprising [the Tonghak Revolution] and in the 1 March Movement of 1919 against the Japanese. Soviet officers and their Korean allies perceived Ch'ondogyo as a Korean-type “utopian peasant movement,” which was a potentially useful ally for the Communist Party. From the Soviet point of view, Ch'ondogyo was perhaps the least undesirable religion in North Korea (2001, 106–107).

Clearly, Donghak/Cheondogyo is as central to North Korean historiography as it is to the official histories generated in the South.

### *The Minjung and Their Antigovernment Forebears*

The political appropriations of Donghak/Cheondogyo are also evident in the *minjung* (people) culture movement that arose in South Korea

during the 1970s. According to Choi Chungmoo (1995, 117), "The methodology of the *minjung* culture movement is essentially a rereading of history as history of the oppressed *minjung*'s struggle and a representation of that history as a paradigm of change. In the history thus reread, hitherto marginalized people enter the central arena of history or become agents of history." Thus, *minjung* ideologues focus on "the people" and place them in opposition to the state (Song 1999, 143-193; Wells 1995).

The Donghak Revolution continued to play a key role in *minjung* discourse, with many *minjung* historians coming to the conclusion that the Donghak Revolution provides the birth of *minjung* spirit and consciousness (Wells 1995, 27; Abelmann 1996, 20). Nevertheless, there has been an even more extreme refocusing of the goals and agenda of the movement, as the *minjung* revisionist histories use the revolution as evidence of the growth of peasant consciousness (Abelmann 1993) and subsume its religious dimensions completely.<sup>3</sup> "Donghak" is regarded to be simply a convenient label for a revolutionary war that at its core involved disgruntled peasants tired of the corruption and economic inequality endemic to the prevailing social and political system. Indeed, during the 1990s the *minjung* increasingly labeled the rebellion the "Peasant War of 1894" (Gabo Nong-min Jeonjaeng) for these reasons (Suh Y. 1994; Cho 1994; Lee Y. 1994; Ahn and Park 1994).

Jeon Bong-jun has had a particularly prominent role to play in the *minjung* narratives, which is interesting because of the considerable controversy surrounding his political and religious affiliations. For several scholars, Jeon was a pious Confucian dedicated to upholding the ideals of the government. Some have suggested that the rebellion was actually the carefully staged result of a conspiracy between Jeon and the Daewongun—the conservative Korean regent of the period then waging a pitched battle with the ruling Min clan

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3. Although *minjung* theologians have focused on the religious dimensions of Donghak thought (Ahn 2001; Lee 1996), their interpretations have been less influential than those of the *minjung* historiographers.

(Lew 1990). Clearly, such a perspective validates the state view that the Donghak Revolution was essentially a nationalistic, antiforeign movement. On the other hand, the *minjung* movement depicts Jeon as a radical dissident fighting against the government in much the same way as the contemporary *minjung* movement opposes the government. For this reason Jeon became a key icon of the *minjung* movement, and represents the most popular figure in the *minjung* art of the 1980s (Song 1999, 7). He has also been the subject of numerous tributes in the literary genre.

Thus, in the *minjung* movement, the uprisings from a previous century are symbolically transformed into a movement *against* the state, providing legitimacy to the goals of the contemporary *minjung*—a group whose interests are also counter to those of the state (Song 1999, 157-158). Farmer activists, students, artists, and intellectuals have all evoked Donghak imagery in order to provide continuity between their own goals and those of the Donghak revolutionaries. As Abelmann (1996, 24) comments, “In this lineage of *minjung* struggle, the Tonghak [sic] Peasant Revolution was widely evoked by the community. . . . In the *minjung*-as-subject lineage, social actors who carry the torch of Tonghak are the legitimate national subjects.”<sup>4</sup>

One of the more creative attempts to graft the Donghak Revolution onto *minjung* consciousness is found in Sin Dong-yeop’s epic 1975 poem entitled *Geumgang* (Geumgang River). As Choi Chung-moo (1995, 112-113) notes, in this poem the historical and social gap between the world of the Donghak in the 1890s and the Korean labour exploitation of the 1960s is collapsed. The hero of the poem is simultaneously a twentieth-century day laborer in Seoul and a warrior of the Donghak Peasant War. On a similar note, Lee Namhee (1991, 211) discusses the ways in which the student movement transformed the Donghak Revolution to provide a sense of legitimacy

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4. Abelmann directs her comments explicitly towards farmer activists in the social movement she explores in her 1996 work; however, I think they also encapsulate broader *minjung* appropriations of Donghak.

and continuity to its goals. The revolution was seen to represent a movement against the existing system—against the state. Lee (1991, 211) notes that, “The precedent of the uprising led and constituted by peasants . . . has given students a sense of historical legitimacy and a sense of continuity, a kind of historical mandate that tells them to ‘carry on’.”

Nevertheless, by the mid-1990s there was a growing disillusionment with the *minjung* movement. As Abelmann (1997, 251) notes, “*Minjung*, a noun and adjective that could in the 1980s be combined with almost anything—history, music, art, film, religion, economics, etc.—was obsolete by the 1990s with its ‘new generation,’ ‘civil society,’ and ‘civil movements.’” Increasingly, people want to distance themselves from the “fascism”<sup>5</sup> of *minjung* discourse and the authoritarianism of previous governments—“from the totalizing projects of both the left and the right” (Abelmann 1997, 250). However, despite the declining popularity of *minjung* narratives, this movement was ultimately successful in reinforcing the perception of Donghak as a political reform movement divorced from religious belief.

### *Summary*

Despite their differences, the political appropriations of the Donghak Revolution all emphasize the social and political dimensions of the movement and downplay its religious identity. In the South Korean context, the revolution becomes an expression of a Korean move towards modernization, nationalism, and prosperity, forestalled only by Japanese designs on the country. Alternatively, in the North Korean version, the Donghak Peasant Revolution becomes the original wellspring of indigenous Communism. This suggests that the “American Imperialists” in the South have implemented a political regime contrary to the natural impulses of the Korean people, who gravitate towards Communism.

The *minjung* version goes the furthest in eliminating the reli-

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5. See Song (1999) for a discussion of the fascist dimensions of *minjung* discourse.

gious dimensions of the movement, which becomes an antigovernment proletariat uprising, providing continuity between the goals of the revolutionary farmers and contemporary *minjung* objectives. By claiming a connection with the Donghak Revolution, the groups involved reinforce, validate, and legitimize a clearly political identity. Therefore, the ongoing presence of the religion in nationalist literature and tourist brochures can be readily comprehended within this context.

### **Other Historical Appropriations: The Gwangju Uprising**

The Donghak Revolution is not the only important historical event in Korea to be subjected to such processes of political appropriation. Linda Lewis (2002) has produced an interesting analysis of the ways in which the 1980 Gwangju Uprising has been reimagined in Korean political culture.<sup>6</sup> The processes of appropriation that “5.18” (as the Uprising is known) has undergone bear strikingly similarity to ways that the Donghak Revolution has been taken up. As Lewis documents, the Gwangju Uprising has been reimagined and appropriated by numerous groups and organizations, each with competing claims, agendas and motivations.

In the 1980s the Gwangju Uprising was taken up by the *minjung* culture movement. In the *minjung* interpretation, 5.18 became celebrated as a key symbol of Korean struggle and resistance to the oppressive military government. However, in the late 1990s the South Korean government was quite successful in transforming the Gwangju Uprising from an antigovernment popular revolt into the “5.18 Democratization Movement.”<sup>7</sup> In this framework, the Gwangju Uprising was positioned as merely a milestone in the government’s journey towards democracy. Thus, rather than a massacre to be com-

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6. Much of the discussion that follows is taken from a review of Lewis's book I prepared for *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* (see Bell 2004).
  7. The political role of naming is also evident in the competing discourses surrounding the Donghak Revolution.

memorated, it became an event to be celebrated—complete with its own cartoon mascot.

Although victims' associations continue to jostle for a voice in representing 5.18, their memories and experiences appear to be increasingly irrelevant to the official representations of the movement. Thus, Lewis points out that commemorating is also a process of forgetting, as these official histories displace the private memories of those who were caught up in 5.18. However, the bodies of those who lived through the Uprising contest the official histories that have been created. As Lewis (2002, 153) notes, "There are in Gwangju many whose personal histories are counterhegemonic, whose very bodies even offer a site for resistance to the imposition of a singular 5.18 narrative and the amnesia of commemoration in the late 1990s."

### Cheondogyo Unmade

Lewis raises an important point about the ways those with the most direct stake in the Gwangju Uprising (the victims and their families) have been detrimentally affected by the construction of official narratives. Similar questions can be raised about the effects that the political appropriations of Donghak have had on those with the most direct stake in the religion—contemporary Cheondogyo adherents. Indeed, in its contemporary form, the religion has clearly not achieved a noticeable degree of "success" in the broader Korean context, despite the attention heaped upon Donghak within state, nationalist, and *minjung* discourses. Indeed, Cheondogyo is an aging religion—most adherents at the parish (*gyogu*) where I conduct field-work are well over 50. There is also very little active recruitment into Cheondogyo, and most adherents have belonged to the religion for two or more generations. This, coupled with the remarkable decline in the size of Cheondogyo since the 1920s,<sup>8</sup> tends to indicate that the

8. Many adherents attribute this decline to persecution by the Japanese colonial government after the March First Movement of 1919.

future of the religion in its present form is limited. In light of this decline, the question can be raised regarding the effects that this appropriation has had on Cheondogyo. Has this recognition made the religion, or been responsible for its undoing?

Clearly, there are many dimensions to the relative decline of Cheondogyo over the past 75 years. A lack of active proselytizing, coupled with the remarkable growth of Christianity, seem to be central factors. However, the role of these political appropriations should not be ignored. Although the aims and agendas of the groups appropriating the movement differ, they have one thing in common: they subsume Cheondogyo's religious dimensions in favor of other attributed goals. Therefore, it would appear that Cheondogyo's political and nationalistic legitimacy has come at the expense of its religious legitimacy. Indeed, the emphasis on the social rather than religious dimensions of the movement has created a perception that Donghak/Cheondogyo is not a religion at all. Thus, while the Korea Information Service (2001) does indeed describe Cheondogyo as a key Korean religion, it states "Cheondogyo was initiated as a social and technological movement. . . ." Popular understandings of Donghak/Cheondogyo echo this perception; the tendency of Korean people to correct me when I describe Donghak as a religious movement helps to demonstrate the pervasiveness of this view.<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, the small numbers of Koreans who have converted to Cheondogyo from other religions have often been drawn to it for these very reasons—its historical significance and nationalist dimensions—rather than its theological underpinnings (although in time these are generally considered attractive too).<sup>10</sup> This emphasis on the nationalistic origins of the movement has meant that all too often Cheondogyo is seen to be a social movement of the past, rather than a religious movement of the present. It has become an artifact of history in the eyes of most Koreans. Cheondogyo may be dusted off and

9. Cheondogyo informants have also mentioned the lack of general awareness about their religion, and the perception that Donghak is a "dead" movement.

10. Indeed, in a written survey I conducted, one young Cheondogyo informant continued to insist that Cheondogyo was not a religion but a political movement.

paraded in public on appropriate occasions as a symbol of Korean nationalism, but is seen to be largely irrelevant to contemporary Korean culture. However, this antiquation of Cheondogyo is not merely the product of nationalist and *minjung* discourses of the post-colonial era; it is an ongoing process that continues today. In other words, Donghak/Cheondogyo's identity as a historically important antique is not a state achieved in the "past" but is actively being constructed in the "present."

In a relevant paper, Kendall (1998) explores the ways in which discourses on Korean shamanism esteem practitioners and simultaneously erase their agency. She notes that while in recent years shamans have been celebrated as repositories of national tradition, instead of being seen as the producers of history, they have become "muted artifacts" of it. They have been deprived of a voice, as "experts" on national cultural heritage come to speak for the practitioners. Nevertheless, as Kendall also points out, shamans themselves have been complicit in this process. Indeed, elsewhere Choi Chungmoo (1997) has noted that many shamans compete for the privilege of being designated as "living human treasures."

Similar is true of Cheondogyo. Whilst lauded as a repository of national tradition, it is simultaneously transformed into a "muted artifact" of it, and is silenced as an active religious movement. However, once again, there has been a certain level of complicity in this process. When Choe Je-u was designated a "Cultural Figure" of November 1998 by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Cheondogyo adherents were thrilled at the publicity. However, while such state recognition is gratifying, its effects are problematic—as a number of Cheondogyo adherents themselves recognize.

In the past few years, many adherents have begun to think more critically about the religion's connection with political and nationalist discourses. There is growing resistance to these labels, which many feel have harmed the movement's status as a religion.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore,

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11. In fact, when I first arrived in Korea, I intended to focus on Cheondogyo's relationship with Korean nationalism and the state. Nevertheless, it soon became apparent

it has become clear to a number of adherents that the goals of the political and government groups who seek to draw on them are rather different from their own. Thus, these adherents now stress that Cheondogyo has been nationalistic incidentally rather than by design. They feel that the nationalist aspects of the movement's doctrine have been emphasized at the expense of its religious content and contemporary relevance.

However, I would assert that as long as Cheondogyo is held up as an exemplar of *incipient* nationalism, modernism, or peasant consciousness, it must be understood as a relic of Korean history—an important and valuable relic—but a relic nonetheless. Furthermore, not only has this state recognition led to a particular view of the religion, which keeps it locked in the past and wrapped up in the closet—it appears that the recognition has caused deeper and more disturbing fractures in the religion itself. These problems stem largely from the contradictory nature of state policy regarding religion in the country. As Keyes, Hardacre, and Kendall (1994) have noted, while modernization demands a rejection of ritual practices, nationalism often depends on a celebration of precisely the same practices. Therefore, “the process of creating modern nation-states has . . . entailed two rather contradictory stances toward religion” (1994, 6).

Thus, the state attitude towards religion in Korea has been characterized by a bewildering and contradictory array of policies, all of which have simultaneously condemned and lauded religions. For example, although shamans are held up as exemplars of indigenous folk culture, as Kendall (1998, 63) points out, they have also been portrayed as the “superstitious antithesis of modernity.” Indeed, the ecstatic and “magical” aspects of shamanic rituals have been heavily criticized as primitive and ignorant, and by 1972 shamanic rituals had become the target of state-initiated antisuperstition campaigns (Choi 1997, 26).

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that officials at Cheondogyo were unhappy with my proposed study; people emphasized that Cheondogyo is a “universal” and “international” religion, not a nationalistic one. The reasons for their uneasiness with my original project would later become apparent.

These contradictory policies towards shamanism are also evident in the political attitudes towards Confucianism and Buddhism. The former has been the target of special criticism; blamed for encouraging cronyism, inhibiting innovation, and subordinating women. Yet, while in 1969 the government passed a regulation to abolish symbols of Confucian ideology in Korea, it simultaneously relied on these same Confucian principles to maintain its authority over the Korean people (Choi 1997, 26). Moreover, despite attacks on Confucian ideology as an obstacle to economic growth, it has also been cited as the source of South Korea's remarkable economic success (Janelli 1993, 57). As Choi Chungmoo (1997, 27) notes, the contradictory policies implemented in South Korea revealed the dilemmas of ". . . a new state with old traditions, torn between two modes of thought."<sup>12</sup>

These contradictory policies have also left their mark on Cheondogyo. Although Cheondogyo has been co-opted by the North and South Korean states to legitimize their own political and economic agendas, religious practices in Cheondogyo derive their authority from other than the state (cf. Keyes, Hardacre, and Kendall 1994, 5-6). As we have seen, Cheondogyo's spiritual authority actually stems from the ecstatic religious experiences of the movement's founder. Several scholars have likened Choe Je-u's mystical experience in 1860 to the possession trance of charismatic Korean shamans (Jorgensen 1999; Kim C. 1993; Choi D. 1982); certainly, there are "magical" dimensions to Cheondogyo practice that bear similarities to shamanism.<sup>13</sup>

The problem is, of course, that the South Korean state has explicitly condemned such practices and beliefs as traditionalist and primitive. Thus, the same contradictory attitudes that have plagued gov-

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12. See also Kim (1994) and Kendall (1996, 72-73) for similar discussions.

13. This is not to suggest that the meaning of the practices in Cheondogyo is the same as its shamanic forebears—in many instances they have been radically reinterpreted. Still, in light of Cheondogyo's intentionally syncretic roots, there is little doubt that Choe Je-u drew on existing shamanic beliefs and practices, even while radically transforming them. See Beirne (1999) for a discussion of several similarities between Donghak and shamanic practices.

ernment policy towards religion in Korea have led to certain tensions in Cheondogyo. The religion struggles with its identity as a modern, nationalistic religion, whilst at the same time being grounded in a spiritual framework, which is deemed by the government to be primitive and superstitious. The fact that Cheondogyo has been taken up so completely as a symbol of indigenous modernization and nationalism has only exacerbated these tensions.

This state appropriation is partly responsible for the present problems surrounding ecstatic trance in Cheondogyo (although other factors have certainly contributed). While ecstatic trance continues to form an important dimension of Cheondogyo religiosity, there is a general lack of consensus regarding this experience and the meanings that can be attributed to it. However, amongst adherents there is a common perception that ecstatic trance represents a type of shamanism and is therefore a primitive, traditional, and even dangerous form of religious experience. Obviously such perceptions stem from existing discourses regarding the nature of shamanism, which have in part been generated by the state.

These same discourses emphasize the modern, nationalistic basis of Cheondogyo—a view held by many Cheondogyo adherents and leaders themselves. Yet to purge the religion of these “primitive,” “traditional,” and “shamanic” dimensions would be to condemn the spiritual basis of their own religion—and to deny its fundamentally religious roots. Unsurprisingly, this results in a strong ambivalence, as leaders are torn between a desire to rid themselves of such “primitive” and “traditionalist” dimensions in order to retain their identity as a “modern” movement, and the awareness that to do so would be to destroy their movement as a religion.

## **Conclusion**

Cheondogyo has achieved a level of political legitimacy denied to other new religions because of its connection with the Donghak Revolution. Thus the religion has been taken up as an important symbol

of indigenous modernization, nationalism, democracy, and even Communism. Therefore, despite its current small size, because of this political approbation Cheondogyo remains highly visible in nationalist and tourist publications. However, it is precisely Cheondogyo's political appropriation that may be partly responsible for its present cultural invisibility. This is because the movement has been locked into an identity that emphasizes its political and social connection with the past, rather than its religious connection with the present.

The religion's constitution within the framework of the state has been limiting and restrictive in other ways. In some respects, it actually reinforces internal dilemmas within Cheondogyo regarding its own traditionalist/modernist and spiritual/philosophical dimensions. Therefore, while the Donghak Revolution may have "made" Cheondogyo as a respected social and political movement of the past, in many respects the revolution has unmade it as a religious movement of the present.

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**GLOSSARY**

Cheondogyo	天道教	<i>gyogu</i>	教區
Cheondogyo	天道教	<i>hyeongmyeong</i>	革命
Cheongudang	青友黨	<i>innaecheon</i>	人乃天
Cheonjugyo	天主教	<i>juche</i>	主體
Daewongun	大院君	<i>minjokjeok minjuuui</i>	民族的 民主主義
Donghak	東學	<i>minjung</i>	民衆
Gabo Nongmin	甲午農民	<i>munhwa inmul</i>	文化人物
Jeonjaeng	戰爭	<i>sangmin</i>	常民
Geumgang	錦江	<i>yangban</i>	兩班