

Document Based Questions - The Tonghak Religion and Uprising: Ch'oe Che-u on Learning Truth and the Twelve Reforms proclaimed by the Tonghak Overseer's Office

Introduction

Tonghak was a new Korean religion founded by Ch'oe Cheu (1824-1864) in 1860. After Ch'oe Cheu was executed (as an alleged Catholic) in 1864, Ch'oe Sihyŏng (1827-1898) became leader of the religion. In 1894-1895, there was an uprising that swept Korea that was associated with Tonghak believers (the leader was a local Tonghak leader named Chŏn Pongjun [1854-1895]) and spread along Tonghak networks, though scholars continue to debate just how central the religious doctrines were to this event.

At the time of Ch'oe Cheu's mystical revelation in 1860, Catholic doctrine and teachings, though illegal, were becoming known in Korea. In 1860, furthermore, British and French troops sacked Beijing, sending shock waves throughout East Asia. For many intellectuals, including Ch'oe (a down-on-his-luck literatus), Western religion and technological/military power were associated. Catholicism was known in Korea as Sŏhak, or "Western Learning"; therefore, Ch'oe titled his new religion, which sought the revitalization of Korea beginning with the spiritual, Tonghak or "Eastern Learning."

In documents from the Tonghak uprising, meanwhile, a broad set of concerns — social, political, nationalist, etc. — are evident. The historical meaning(s) of Tonghak have been debated for over a century by scholars who have highlighted different historical moments and different aspects of its reformist goals. The first document below is one of those in which Ch'oe Cheu described his revelation. The second was a proclamation from a local Tonghak authority in a city controlled by the rebels in the course of the 1894 revolt.



Document 1: The Tonghak Religion and Uprising: Excerpts from Ch'oe Cheu on Learning Truth

[From the *Ch'ondogyo kyongjon*, pp. 6-17]

In April 1860 the whole world was in turmoil, and the hearts of the people turned evil. And a strange rumor spread in the world, saying: **"The Westerners cultivated high ethics, and there is nothing they cannot do. There is no one who can stand before their attacking military power, and even China is being destroyed."** May we not suffer the same fate? Their Way is called the Western Way, their religion Christianity, and their teaching the Heavenly teaching. Could it be that they know the time of Heaven and received the Mandate of Heaven? ...

They asked: **"You say there is similarity. Then would you call your way 'the Western Learning'?"** I replied: "Not so. I was born in the East and received the truth in the East. Therefore, the Way is the Heavenly Way and the doctrine is the Eastern Learning (Tonghak)...."

[Translated by Yong Choon Kim]

Question:

1. How does Ch'oe relate Christianity to Western military power? Should Choson simply become Christian in his view? Why or why not?

Document 2: The Tonghak Religion and Uprising: Twelve Reforms Proclaimed by the Tonghak's Overseer's Office in 1894

[From the *Tonghak sa*, pp. 126-127]

1. The ill will that has long persisted between Tonghak believers and the government shall be eradicated. There should be cooperation in all aspects of governance.
2. Crimes committed by greedy and corrupt officials shall be investigated and severely punished.
3. The wrongdoers among the rich and powerful shall be severely punished.
4. The wicked among the Confucian literati and the yangban class shall be ordered to mend their ways.
5. Slave registry documents shall be burned.
6. There shall be improvements in the treatment of the seven classes of lowborn (*ch'ilban ch'onin*), and butchers shall no longer be required to wear the "P'yongyang hat."
7. A young widow shall be allowed to remarry.
8. Improper levies of sundry taxes shall be completely terminated.
9. In recruiting officials, regionalism shall be eliminated, and talented persons shall be appointed irrespective of their birthplace.
10. Persons who are in league with foreign enemies shall be severely punished.
11. All past debts, private or public, shall be declared null and void.
12. Farmland shall be equitably redistributed for cultivation.

[Translated by Han-Kyo Kim]

Questions:

2. Do the social reforms mandated by the Tonghak authorities in 1894 seem revolutionary? Do they aim for the fundamental overthrow of the Choson social order? Why or why not?
3. Between the two documents, how would you describe the Tonghak attitude towards the Western and Japanese power and influence that were spreading within the Korean peninsula?

