[page 92**]**

**CH’ONDOGYO ENTERS ITS SECOND CENTURY**

**by Benjamin Weems**

The Ch’ondogyo cult, which passed its century mark in 1960, is the oldest of Korea’s “new” religions. A massive, patriotic ceremony in Taegu in 1963 to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the martyrdom of the founder, Ch’oe Che-u, showed that the sect is still accorded national recognition. Additional evidence was provided in 1966 by the unveiling of a statue of the great Ch’ondogyo leader Son Pyong-hi in Seoul’s Pagoda Park, a place hallowed as the birthplace of the 1919 independence uprising. A movement which is so recognized after over a century of existence deserves a review of its origins and its role in Korea’s modern national life.

Origins of Ch’ondogyo

Ch’ondogyo, originally known as Tonghak (Eastern Learning), was founded in 1860 by Ch’oe Che-u, a patriotic reformist scholar. It was a mystical, idealistic religious doctrine, in which Ch’oe combined and redefined certain basic principles of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. He also took certain organizational and ritualistic elements from Roman Catholicism, and borrowed some of the features of Korean shamanism and geomancy.1

The theoretical and ritualistic basis of Ch’ondogyo doctrine is embodied in a twenty-one character Sacred Formula which Ch’oe Che-u created, and from which he derived the cardinal principle of *in nae ch’on* (man and God are one). This means, in brief, that man is potentially God, but that this state of oneness with God is actually achieved only as man exercises sincere

1 The material on the origins of Ch’ondogyo is from Benjamin Weems, *Reform, Rebellion, and the Heavenly Way*, Association of Asian Studies Monograph No. XV (Tuscon, The University of Arizona Press, 1964), Passim

[page 93**]**

faith. This faith must also be implemented by a harmonization of all truth into a *to*, or way of life, based on the principle of *in nae ch’on*.

As applied to man’s relations in society, the basic principle of *in nae ch’on* is reflected in the theory of *tong kwi il ch’e* (all life evolves toward a social oneness). Human society, according to this concept, is a collective, cooperative, organized body of individuals, bearing the same sort of relationship to society as each component part of the human body bears toward the whole body. Society cannot enjoy the optimum improvement if the development of the individual is ignored, nor can the individual realize his highest potential outside the coordinating and harmonizing influences of society.

In the field of ethics, the theory of *sa in yo ch’*on (treat people as though they were God) is the application of the basic principle of *in nae ch’on*. *Sa in yo ch’on* incorporates the three virtues of sincerity, respect, and faith. Sincerity is thought of as embracing truth, diligence, and energy. Respect includes: (1) respect for heaven, or religious consciousness; (2) respect for man (that is, respect for individual character and actions without discrimination); and (3) respect for things (that is, regard for the value of all things as having come from heaven). Faith is regarded as embracing complete honesty, personal loyalty, and absence of social discrimination in human relations.

The practical application of Ch’oe Che-u’s dynamic doctrine was perfected by his successors, Ch’oe Si-hyong and Son Pyong-ni. They implemented the principles of *sa in yo* (treat people as though they were God) and *tong kwi il ch’e* (all life evolves toward a social oneness) so as to make them form the basis for new social standards in Korean ethical, social, economic, and political life. In terms of the individual Korean of that day, the Tonghak teachings meant that man, having within himself divine potentialities, had the ability eventually to change his oppressive environment through an evolutionary reformation.

The specific character and role of Ch’ondogyo in Korea’s [page 94**]** national life has varied during the three important periods of its existence. During the first (or Tonghak) period (1860-1905) Ch’ondogyo was a reform movement directed against the social, ecnomic, and political abuses of the time. The second period (1905-1945) was that of Japanese control of Korea, during which Ch’on’ondogyo retained its charater as a domestic reform movement, but redirected its energies toward the achievement of Korean independence from Japanese control. This period was highlighted by the nation-wide, nonviolent independence uprising of 1919, organized and financed largely by Ch’ondogyo but participated in by Christians, Buddhists, and the Korean general public. The third Ch’ondogyo period is that from 1945 to the present time, characterized by the disastrous division of Korea and the destructive Korean War. These major developments have had strong and largely debilitating effects on Ch’ondogyo, but it has nevertheless been able to survive, as the accounts presented in this paper will attest.

Chondogyo Developments Since 1954

Although the Ch’ondogyo movement had originated in the extreme southern part of Korea, the proponderance of its membership was in northern Korea by 1945, when Korea was liberated from Japanese rule. One of the major reasons for this shift appears to have been the setback to reform and nationalist activities in the south as a result of two Ch’ondogyo defeats; in the Tonghak Rebellion of 1894 and in the independence uprising of 1919.

The territorial division of Korea in 1945 thus had a strong, direct impact upon the status and effectiveness of Ch’ondogyo, both as a political entity and as a religious cult. The political arm (*Ch’ondogyo Ch’ong’u-dang* or Ch’ondogyo Young Friends Party) claimed over 400,000 members in the north and only 80,000 in the south. In the north, it became one of two non-Communist political groups recognized by the Communist authorities and lost its identity as a genuine nationalist group. The small remnant of the party in the south was rendered virtually powerless by internal political factionalism. As a religious body, Ch’ondogyo was similarly divided (with about [page 95**]** 2,000,000 members in the north and 600,000 in the south), but suffered somewhat less than did its political party from Communist political pressures in the north or factionalism in the south. In the south, the Ch’ondogyo sect enjoyed complete freedom. In north Korea, it was permitted to exist and, as the only non-Communist religio-political avenue open, attracted large numbers of anti-Communist nationalist leaders who were not adherents of the cult but approved of its nationalist, humanist, non-Communist traditions.2

Information which has come to light since the end of the Korean War has given credence to the long-standing insistence of Ch’ondogyo leaders in the Republic of Korea that Ch’ondogyo (but not its political party) in north Korea has remained true to its spiritual and nationalist principles despite strong, continuing Communist pressures.

The “Second Sam Il Independence Movement”

A story which first appeared in print in the *Hanguk Ilbo* on February 23, 1958, and has since been substantiated by participants and eyewitnesses, describes the “Second Sam Il Independence Movement,” conducted by Ch’ondogyo members in north Korea in 1948. The event had been kept secert for ten years to protect many participants still in the north.

The timing was the early part of 1948, after the US-USSR Joint Commission had failed in its efforts to unify Korea through direct negotiations between the two occupying powers. The United Nations General Assembly had taken over the task of unifying Korea and had sent a commission to Korea to supervise elections for a nation-wide government. When the UN Commission was denied access to North Korea, faithful Ch’ondogyo members in the north, who maintained contact with their general headquarters in Seoul, requested permission to stage some sort of demonstration to dramatize their opposition to a permanent division of the nation and their insistence on

2 The above material on developments since 1945 is from official Ch’ondogyo sources in Seoul.

[page96**]**

national unification.

After a brief period of hesitation, Ch’ondogyo leaders in Seoul under the direction of Ch’oe Rin (a principal planner of the 1919 demonstration) met on January 20, 1948 to plan a mass popular independence rally in North Korea, with Ch’ondogyo members as its nucleus. The objectives were: (a) establishment of a unified government of all Korea; (b) welcoming the UN Commission to North Korea; and (c) disbanding of the US and Russian military governments.

The event, modeled after that of 1919, was planned to include the following declaration of purposes and threepoint pledge:

We are a homogenous nation backed with nearly 5,000 years of history, The complete independence of our motherland depends on (1) the establishment of a unified government through a self-managed general election; and (2) overcoming the handicap of the 38th parallel division and establishing a unified government.

We therefore declare that we are initiating a national self- determination movement and make the following pledges: (1) We aim to achieve complete independence by national self-determination; (2) we will not give up this movement until we have established a unified government; and (3) we will carry out this program with non-volence and non- resistance.

The planners of the demonstration decided to accept the offers of two dedicated Ch’ondogyo women to serve as emissaries of the Ch’ondogyo headquarters in Seoul to carry the documents to the North Korean Ch’ondogyo leaders. Mrs. Pak Hyon-hwa and Mrs. Yu Un-dok set off from Seoul for north Korea on February 7.

Mrs. Yu, whose husband had carefully written her message in small writing on Korean paper and hidden it in the lining of her undergarments, suffered frostbite in the mountains just above the 38th parallel. She was picked up by the North [page 97**]** Korean authorities and reportedly executed.

Mrs. Pak succeeded in reaching Pyongyang and transmitting the directive to Ch’ondogyo leaders Kim Il-dae and Kim Tok-rin.3 These two men and their fellows in the top leadership of Ch’ondogyo in the north resolved, after careful consideration, to follow the directions from Seoul and hold a mass rally on March 1. They made the error, however, of making their decision known to Kim Tal-hyon, a leader of the political party (Ch’ondogyo Ch’ong’u-dang) and Chairman of the Supreme People’s Committee of the North Korean regime. Kim claimed to disagree with the other leaders’ decision on the grounds that its implementation would exact too high a price in terms of suffering and sacrifice among Ch’ondogyo members. The Ch’ondogyo leaders then changed their tactics, burning all copies of the directives from Seoul and turning the planning over to their undergound organization known as the Samjae-dang. They instructed the Samjae-dang leaders to circulate instructions concerning the demonstration through their cellular organizational structure. This underground apparatus did its work thoroughly and quickly, so that all prospective participants were notified and all preparations made well in advance of March 1. About four days before the target date, however, the treacherous Kim Tal-hyon, apparently with a view to saving himself rather than his fellow Ch’ondogyo members, reported the entire plan to the Communist security police. As a result, some 10,000 Ch’ondogyo leaders and members were arrested, but all except 87 persons were later released. Five of the 87 were sentenced to death and the remaining 82 given sentences to hard labor ranging from seven years to “unlimited.”

Despite the disastrous outcome in Pyongyang and other urban centers, the demonstration plans were carried out in a number of remote sections of North Korea. A particularly significant rally took place in Nyongbyon, P’yongan Puk-to, where the local citizens put on widely scattered demonstrations throughout the *Kun* (county) .4

3 Mrs. Pak returned to Seoul, where she is still living. The writer has checked the details of the story with her.

4 *Kyonghyang Sinmun*, Seoul, March, 1948*.*

[page98**]**

The Yong- U Hoe Incident

Leading Ch’ondogyo members who survived the “Second Sam Il Movement” incident formed an underground organization called *Yong-U Hoe* (Circle Society) which operated in Pyongyang under directions from Seoul headquarters until the eve of the Korean War. In May, 1950, the operations of this society became known to the Communist authorities and some 165 leaders and followers of the group were arrested. A number of those arrested were able to escape to the Republic of Korea during the Korean War, and one of them (Yi Chae-jon) was awarded a citation by the Republic of Korea Government.5

The Ch’ondogyo War Prisoners

At the end of the Korean hostilities, war prisoners were screened by the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC) to determine the desires of the prisoners regarding repatriation. Many thousands of Ch’ondogyo members among the North Korean prisoners held by the United Nations Command expressed a strong determination to stay in the Republic of Korea. When they were released by the NNSC, they marched southward from Panmunjom triumphantly, bearing high over their heads the Republic of Korea flag and the banner of Ch’ondogyo.

Current Trends in Ch’ondogyo

According to the most recent statistics of the central head-quarters of Ch’ondogyo in Seoul, the sect now has, in the Republic of Korea, 600,000 members and 100 churches, which are located in the chief population centers of the country. No reliable data on the cult or its political affiliates in North Korea are now available.

In the Republic of Korea, Ch’ondogyo is not now affiliated

5 The writer has verified these statements about the Yonp-U Hoe incident with Mr. Yi.

[page 99**]**

with any outside political organization and has no political organizations of its own. It operates branches devoted to work with youth and women, and publishes a magazine entitled *Sae Ingan* (New Human Being) as its official organ.

Although the division of the country, dislocations of the Korean War, and the severe restrictions of normal Chon’dogyo activities in North Korea have seriously reduced the potential strength of the cult in Korea as a whole, these developments have brought some beneficial effects to Ch’ondogyo in the Republic of Korea. For example, a large number of faithful Ch’ondogyo members fled south from Communist North Korea during the Korean War and remained in the ROK. This not only bolstered the numerical strength ef Ch’ondogyo in the south, but also served to reduce the serious factionalism which had hampered the cult in the south, by greatly strengthening the New Faction (*Sin P’a*) against the small and generally outmoded, but previously influential Old Faction (*Ku P’a*).

A serious weakness of Ch’ondogyo is that, in spite of the loss of many of its leaders through persecution in the north and through the natural attrition of old age, incapacity and death, the organization has not exerted much effof toward the training of younger leaders.

Tonghak ideology and actions, which are the historical basis of modern Ch’ondogyo, have become increasingly popular subjects of research in academic circles in recent years. Concurrently, there has been a steadily growing movement, under the leadership of Ch’oe Ik-hwan, grandson of Ch’oe hyong (the second great leader of Ch’ondogyo), dedicated to the nation-wide propagation of the reformist ideal of Tonghak and to unification among the forty sects and factions which trace their common origin to the Tonghak movement. The drive for reunification took an important step forward on September 4, 1966 when representatives of the forty Tonghak elements joined in the formal inauguration of the *Tonvhak Chongsin Sonyong Hoe* (Society for the Rebirth of the Tonghak Spirit).

[page 100**]**

CONCLUSION

The events which have exerted the most decisive influences on the Ch’ondogyo movement have been the long, enervating Japanese occupation; and the strong political pressures and separations caused by the division of the country since; and the Korean War. Despite the force and great historic importance of these developments, however, they have not resulted in any significant changes in the creed, ritual, or organizational structure of Ch’ondogyo as a religious cult. They have had a seriously depressing effect on both the quantity and the quality of Ch’ondogyo leadership and on the vigor and soundness of its platform as a Korean nationalist organization. Nevertheless, significant elements of the Ch’ondogyo membership have, even under the severely oppressive rule of the Communists in North Korea, performed isolated acts which exemplified the nationalistic ideals and patriotism of the Tonghak-Ch’ondogyo tradition at its best.

Ch’ondogyo is still in a period of relative weakness and lack of growth, but there are some signs pointing toward a brighter future. One of the most encouraging signs is the positive leadership role being taken by Ch’ondogyo in the unity drive which has resulted in the establishment of the Society for the Rebirth of the Tonghak Spirit. Another positive element, which is implicit in the entire history of the Tonghak-Ch’ondogyo movement, is the large body of simple, honest, hard-working citizens which makes up the bulk of the Ch’ondogyo membership. The fact that these solid people are spread fairly evenly throughout the Republic of Korea tends to enhance their potential importance to the country. The idealism and enlightened humanism of the Ch’ondogyo religious doctrine are also favorable elements. The principal lack at present is strong leadership at the top. With the infusion of such leadership the three valuable assets of increased unity, strong rank-and-file membership, and inspiring doctrine can be effectively exploited to restore Ch’ondo-gyo to a position of major influence in Korean national life.