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Cover calligraphy Yan Zhenqing 顏眞卿, Tang calligrapher and statesman

Cover illustration Okinawan *Seasar* (© photograph by Ken Yonetani 米谷建)

Lions have never been found on Okinawa, and the custom of revering them as 'king of the beasts' and symbols of protection is said to have originated in ancient Persia. By the time this custom reached Okinawa via China in the fourteenth or fifteenth century, the stone figures bore less and less resemblance to real lions. Early Chinese recordings of a stone 'lion-dog' figure placed within a shrine of the Ryukyu Kingdom (currently Okinawa) date back to 1683. From the late seventeenth century, influenced by Chinese conceptions of *feng shui* 風水, the lion-like symbols or 'seasar' (シーサー, also spelt *shiisaa* or *seesar*) became known for their powers of protection against fire, and could be found in front of the gates of temples or castles, at entrances to the tombs of noble families, and at the entrances of villages or sacred shrines. Today, seasars are placed to ward of any kind of evil spirit, and many different lion-like forms made not only from stone, but from clay, concrete and other materials, with varied colours and styles, may be seen on roofs, gates and at entrances to buildings across the Okinawan archipelago. (—*Julia Yonetani*)

CONFUCIAN POPULISM AND EGALITARIAN TENDENCIES IN TONGHAK THOUGHT

Mark Setton

Introduction

Is egalitarianism, with its emphasis on the equal moral worth and equal treatment in society of all people, incompatible with East Asian values, which are often defined in terms of a unifying emphasis on Confucian hierarchy?[1] Are human rights, which may be viewed as the logical extension of an egalitarian vision of humanity into the legal realm, alien to traditional Asian thought or is it possible to discover related concepts in the work of historical intellectuals or political reformers? As Asian societies democratize, must civil liberties be newly transplanted from the West into Asian soil, or can they be grafted somehow onto pre-existing political tendencies and outgrowths?

During the past few decades, intellectuals in many countries have sought to come to terms with these questions. Although the resulting 'Asian values debate' has ranged broadly at times, it has tended to focus on the elaboration or refutation of the core idea that political values are a matter of culture, and that Western political values are thus to some degree inapplicable to non-Western societies.[2] Discussions on this general theme are often framed in terms of binary oppositions that supposedly signify various culture-specific attributes: egalitarianism versus hierarchy, individualism versus collectivism, universalism versus diversity, political liberalization versus economic development. A marked tendency, most noticeable among advocates of particularism, is for essentialist, culture-based arguments to take the place of historical perspective.[3] Lost in the scuffle, it would seem, is the common-sense recognition that there is considerable diversity of experience in the historical record of any nation or culture.

As a student of Korean Confucianism, I have struggled with these questions at some length. On the one hand, the Confucianism of Confucius and

An earlier version of this paper appears as "Confucian roots of Tonghak egalitarianism," in *Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference in Korean Studies* (Songnam, Korea: Academy of Korean Studies, 2000).

[1] For a concise discussion of the concept of egalitarianism, see Nancy L. Schwartz, "Egalitarianism," in *The encyclopedia of democracy,* 4 vols, ed. Seymour Martin Lipset (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1995), 2: 395–8.

[2] A recent and concise introduction to the terms of this debate, including characteristic statements of several representative positions, can be found in Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, eds, *Democracy in East Asia* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press, 1998); for a discussion of the Asian values debate from the viewpoint of a Western scholar of Asian intellectual history, see Theodore de Bary, *Asian values and human rights: a Confucian communitarian perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

[3] Proponents of the particularity of Asian values often pose Confucianism in stark opposition to the liberal democratic tradition and question the compatibility between ostensibly 'Western' values such as democracy and individualism and contemporary social and political realities in Asian societies /OVER

/where Confucian values continue to exert a dominant influence.

[4] Kim Dae Jung, *Han'guk: minjujuŭi ŭi tŭrama wa somang* (Seoul: Ch'ŏngdo, 1992).

[5] Ibid., p.143.

[6] It should be noted that Kim's discussion does not concern egalitarianism, *per se*, but democracy. Nevertheless, the two issues are closely linked in that egalitarianism "declares the equal dignity of all citizens in a democratic polity" and may thus be seen as an essential component of democracy. Schwartz, "Egalitarianism," p.395.

[7] As Schwartz points out, "Democracies are egalitarian in challenging traditional élites' political power based on family, tribe, ethnicity, status, or inherited wealth." Ibid., p.396. It may be argued, then, that when Kim and others attempt to project democratic values onto traditional Korean society, one gets the sense that they are ultimately concerned with the *egalitarian vision* of democracy, as opposed to its *specific political institutions*.

[8] I wish to thank Don Baker for stressing that the egalitarian themes present in early Confucian texts did not, as a rule, materialize in the form of concrete social or political institutions.

Mencius, as distinct from state-sponsored Confucianism, places a very high priority on the welfare of the citizenry. On the other hand, Confucianism does seem to exhibit certain proclivities that could easily be viewed as incompatible with Western political concepts of the individual. In this connection, I was interested to discover a stimulating discussion of democracy and traditional Korean culture in a book by South Korean President Kim Dae Jung, *Han'guk: minjujuŭi ŭi tŭrama wa somang* (Korea: the Drama and Hope of Democracy).[4] In a chapter entitled "Korea's Traditional Culture and Democracy," Kim argues that many of the constituent elements of democracy have played an influential role in the Korean intellectual tradition. Countering the idea that democracy is incompatible with Korean culture due to the legacies of Confucian rule, Kim suggests that such views, while superficially appealing, are nevertheless based on an inaccurate understanding of the true nature of that rule.[5] On the contrary, Kim asserts that Korean history is very rich in elements helpful to the contemporary Korean effort to establish democratic institutions and practices.[6]

In particular, Kim cites the Tonghak 東學 movement of the late-nineteenth century as embodying the ideal of populism within the structure of a movement ostensibly committed to social and political change along democratic lines. Kim identifies the concepts of *innaech'ŏn* 人乃天 ['humankind and Heaven are one'] and *sain yŏch'ŏn* 事人如天 ['serve/treat humankind as Heaven'] as characteristic Tonghak manifestations of the tradition of Confucian populism and as among its most important creeds. The Tonghak movement, Kim suggests, occupies an important place in the history of peasant uprisings throughout the world in that it featured an intellectual basis constructed principally of democratic ideals. Internally, the Tonghak movement advocated agricultural land reform, reform of the restrictive class system, liberation of slaves, rights of remarriage for widows, punishment of corrupt officials, and greater popular participation in local administration. Externally, the movement sought to strengthen the nation against political and commercial exploitation from abroad. The fact that a peasant movement featuring such exalted democratic objectives could spring forth from Korean soil, apparently free from direct foreign influence, represents to Kim the "latent democratic potential" of traditional Korean society.[7]

Clearly, there was no identifiable movement in traditional Korean political or social thought that could be equated directly with liberal democracy. Nevertheless, the Confucian tradition of populism, which found early articulation in the *Classic of History* (Shujing 書經) and in the *Mencius* (Mengzi 孟子), provided fertile ground in which a tradition not so different from the Western egalitarian tradition had already taken root by the time Western influences began seeping into Korean society.[8] That is to say, a matrix of concepts broadly compatible with modern theories of human equality was already materializing in the thought of key Korean intellectuals out of elements found in the East Asian tradition. Major figures such as Yu

Hyŏngwŏn 柳馨遠 (Pan'gye 磻溪; 1622–73) and Chŏng Yagyong 丁若鏞 (Tasan 茶山; 1762–1836) were applying ideas from this tradition to concrete social problems with increasingly egalitarian consequences. By the time Tonghak founder Ch'oe Cheu 崔濟愚 (Suun 水雲; 1824–64) and his successor Ch'oe Sihyŏng 崔時亨 (Haewŏl 海月; 1827–98) appeared on the scene, it had become possible to use these ideas as the basis for a normative social and moral vision that relied on the moral equality of human beings as a basic tenet. In other words, only with Tonghak do we find an influential ideology that sought to formulate an ontological foundation for its egalitarian message.

In the discussion that follows I advance a number of claims. The first of these is that the egalitarian tendencies within Tonghak thought are very real. That is, in the moral and ethical philosophy of Suun and Haewŏl we see a consistent and reasonably systematic movement away from the caste-based hierarchies of Chosŏn 朝鮮 society toward a social vision that featured equal treatment of all persons as a foundational ideal. A second and related claim is that contrary to past studies which have viewed the egalitarian messages in Tonghak thought as being in conflict with its Confucian tendencies, Tonghak egalitarianism has deep roots in Confucian tradition, particularly in the ideas of Mencius. In the discussion that follows, I will use the term 'Confucian populism' to describe strands of classical Confucian political thought that are conducive to egalitarian ideas.[9] Finally, I will argue that philosophically significant evolution occurs in Tonghak egalitarianism between the leadership of Suun and that of Haewŏl. While the former manages to forge a link between the Confucian tradition of moral self-cultivation and native Korean religious tendencies, it is only in the thought of the latter that we find a connection between moral self-cultivation and ethics, which for our purposes refers to norms for correct social behavior.

I do not attempt here to demonstrate the existence in traditional Korea of democratic institutions, or even of reliable institutions for the preservation of basic human rights. Rather, I offer the more modest argument that the Confucian tradition as it unfolded in Korea contained significant streams of thought that departed rather dramatically from the dominant emphasis on hierarchy and differentiation. If these streams, which I shall discuss under the heading of Confucian populism, did not produce what one might recognize as liberal democratic political institutions—and they clearly failed to do this—then it might be said that they were at least influencing intellectual evolution in a similar direction. Manifestations of this influence, moreover, were not restricted entirely to élite intellectual circles, but also appeared in the broader society, most notably in the popular Tonghak movement. Exploration of this movement or, more precisely, its concept of humanity that provided an initial impetus to its coalescence, will also be an important element of this discussion. Specifically, I will argue that it is in Tonghak humanism that traditional Korean populism took its most elaborate and sophisticated form.

[9] A number of previous studies have noted the prominence of Confucian *terminology* within Tonghak thought (see, for example, Ch'oe Tonghŭi, *Tonghak ŭi sasang kwa undong* [The Tonghak movement and its thought] (Seoul: Sŏnggyun'gwan Taehakkyo, 1980), pp.95–6; Kim Yong Choon, "An analysis of early Ch'ŏndogyo thought," *Korea Journal* 17.10 [Oct. 1977]: 41–6; and Susan S. Shin, "Tonghak thought: the roots of revolution" *Korea Journal* 19.9 (Sept. 1979): 11–20). Shin Ilch'ŏl does mention the impact of Confucian ethics upon Suun's thought in his *Tonghak sasang ŭi ihae* [Understanding Tonghak thought] (Seoul: Sahoe Pip'yŏngsa, 1995), pp.5●–1. Moreover, in a chapter entitled "Tonghak ŭi yuhakjŏk sŏnggyŏk" [The Confucian nature of Tonghak thought], Yun Sasun draws an important distinction between classical and Neo-Confucian influences on Tonghak thought, pointing out that the god of Tonghak bears a significant resemblance to the supreme deity of the early Confucian classics. See Yun Sasun, *Shin sirhak sasangnon* [A new theory of Sirhak thought] (Seoul: Yemun Sŏwŏn, 1996), pp.260–5; see also Yun Sasun, "Tonghak ŭi yuhakjŏk sŏnggyŏk" [The Confucian nature of Tonghak thought], in *Tonghak sasang ŭi saeroun chomyŏng* [New perspectives on Tonghak thought], ed. Minjok Munhwa Yŏn'guso (Seoul: Yŏngnam Taehakkyo Ch'ulp'anbu, 1998), pp.92–108. The present study differs from all of these, however, in that it emphasizes the importance of classical Confucian concepts in the emergence of egalitarian trends in Tonghak thought.

[10] *Shijing*, 3:34, *Shi san jing zhushu* [Commentaries and annotations to the thirteen classics] (Zhejiang: Guji Chubanshe, 1998), 1:156.

[11] Ibid., 6:5, *Shi san jing*, 1:181.

[12] Ibid., 6:7, *Shi san jing*, 1:181.

[13] Ibid., 10:2, *Shi san jing*, 1:227.

[14] Ibid., 16:1, *Shi san jing*, 1:505.

[15] The concept of the Mandate of Heaven, originally described in the *Classic of poetry* and the *Classic of history*, was introduced by the founders of the Zhou dynasty. The essence of the principle of the Mandate of Heaven is that if a ruler fails to embody an adequate degree of *de* 德, or virtue—in other words, if he does not comport himself with virtue in his conduct with the people—he loses his justification for occupying his position and may be removed. Most historians believe that the founders of the Zhou initially used the concept to legitimize changes of dynasty from the predecessors Xia 夏 and Shang 商 which, it was argued, had both lost their Mandate through misrule. The concept was explicated further in the *Mencius*, and eventually influenced the development of Tonghak thought as well. A brief overview of the Mandate of Heaven concept is available in Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian moral self cultivation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), p.3; for a more detailed exposition of the historical development of the concept, see H. G. Creel, "The mandate of heaven," in *The origins of statecraft in China* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1970), vol.1, pp.81–100.

[16] *Mencius*, 4A5. Unless otherwise indicated, references are to D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius* (New York: Penguin Books, 1970).

[17] *Mencius*, 7B14.

[18] *Mencius*, 7B28.

Confucian Populism and the Egalitarian Tradition in Korea Prior to Tonghak

The locus classicus for the concept of Confucian populism (Ch.: *minben* 民本; Kor.: *minbon*) is found in the *Classic of History*, which asserts that "The people are the root of the state. When the root is secure, the nation is at peace."[10] Taken together, the graphs for "people" and "root" form the compound that subsequently has been used to express the concept of Confucian populism, particularly when the modern suffix *chuŭi* (-ism) (Ch.: *zhuyi* 主義) is appended. As developed in other texts, the concept took on an added connotation: that of a fundamental relationship not only between the people and the nation, but also between the people and *Tian* 天, or Heaven. This added sense is expressed in a pair of passages, also from the *Classic of History*, in which the will of the people is closely identified with the will of Heaven: "That which the people desire, Heaven by necessity follows."[11] and "The eyes of Heaven follow the eyes of the people; the ears of Heaven follow the ears of the people."[12]

The close association between the will of Heaven and the will of the people is reinforced in other references from classical sources. For example, a separate passage in the *Classic of History*—"the heart/mind of the people is not constant"[13]—echoes a similar statement found in the *Classic of Poetry* (Shijing 詩經), which states that "the Mandate of Heaven is not constant."[14] As elaborated in these sources, the popular will becomes a critical component of the Mandate of Heaven, which is fundamental to the legitimacy of political leadership.[15]

The tradition of Confucian populism was embraced and extended by Mencius, who proposed a model of the state constructed from elements drawn from the classical sources discussed above:

> The Empire has its basis in the state, the state in the family, and the family in one's own self.[16]

Having invoked classical references in which the state is rooted in the individual man and woman, Mencius leaves little doubt as to the degree of importance to be assigned to the people in this order:

> The people are of supreme importance; the altar to the gods of earth and grain [i.e. the state] comes next; last comes the ruler.[17]

He then offers a warning to future rulers lest they mistake their priorities:

> The feudal lords have three treasures: land, people and government. Those who treasure pearls and jade are sure to suffer the consequences.[18]

When he alludes to unpleasant consequences, Mencius is probably referring to popular revolt of the sort that would be justified under the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven. Working from many of the same assumptions that inform the vision of ideal government set forth by Confucius in the *Analects* (Lunyu

論語), Mencius manages to clarify as well as to transcend that model. The first of these tasks he accomplishes by emphasizing that the ruler's authority is derived from the Mandate of Heaven. To this he adds an important caveat: that a holder of this authority can genuinely be considered a ruler only if he acts like one, due to the principle of Rectification of Names. By contrast, a ruler who is ruthless or neglectful of the needs of his subjects would not be considered a proper ruler and his removal by force would not be considered an improper act from the perspective of Confucian morality.[19]

According to this view, the Mandate of Heaven confers upon a ruler not only ruling authority, but also an inescapable responsibility to look after the welfare of his subjects. Indeed, Mencius places great emphasis on the material well-being of the people. In one famous passage, Mencius writes that only when the elderly eat meat and are clothed in silk will the people be on the way to realizing a just and prosperous society.[20] Yet material security by itself is regarded as insufficient to achieve the ideal of good government. Education and material security are viewed as closely related by Mencius, who states that the people must have a minimum level of economic security as a prerequisite to maintaining a constant mind—that is, the level of awareness required to realize one's moral potential through education and self-cultivation.[21] Here we see that the ideal to which the Mencian model of good government aspires is not merely the paternalistic satisfaction of the material needs of the people, but the transformation of commoners, through education, into responsible citizens. If education is the basic vehicle of this transformation, then material security becomes a necessary condition for its initiation.

In other passages, Mencius develops further the idea that the social stability of the nation—and by implication the political viability of the ruler—is intricately bound up with the material prosperity of the peasantry. This concern is especially apparent in a famous exchange between Mencius and King Hui of Liang 梁惠王, who wonders why the population of his realm has not increased in proportion to the population of neighboring states despite his implementation of relatively humane policies, specifically the relocation of peasants in areas suffering from crop failures to unaffected regions. Mencius rebukes the king for blaming poor economic conditions on crop failures, when they were in fact a product of the king's shortsighted exploitation of human and natural resources:

> If you do not interfere with the busy season in the fields, then there will be more grain than the people can eat; if you do not allow nets with too fine a mesh to be used in large ponds, then there will be more fish and turtles than they can eat; if hatches and axes are permitted in the forests on the hills only in the proper seasons, then there will be more timber than they can use. When the people have more grain, more fish and turtles than they can eat, and more timber than they can use, then in the support of their parents when alive and in the mourning of them when dead, they will be able to have no regrets over anything left undone. This is the first step along the Kingly way.[22]

[19] *Mencius*, 1B8.
[20] *Mencius*, 1A3.
[21] *Mencius*, 3A3.
[22] *Mencius* 1A3.

It is significant that Mencius identifies policies that provide for the material needs of the peasantry as the first priority of governance. This is not to suggest, of course, that statecraft consists only in economic and resource management policy, but rather that economic prosperity is a necessary condition for political and social stability. According to this perspective, policies that benefit the people reflect favorably upon the character of the ruler. This is the essence of Mencian populism.

As appropriated in early Chosŏn statecraft discussions, the concept of populism came to reflect strongly the economic implications of the Mencian formulation. In particular, the economic reform proposals of Chŏng Tojŏn 鄭道傳 [Sambong 三峰; 1342–98], which were never adopted in their most radical form, nonetheless represent an important expression of populist impulses in statecraft. Chŏng is widely regarded as being among the most influential architects of the Chosŏn state. In his *Chosŏn kyŏngguk chŏn* 朝鮮經國典 (Chosŏn Administrative Code), Chŏng Tojŏn states that "the people are the root of the nation and the Heaven [*Tian*] of the ruler."[23] Believing that the economic prosperity of the peasant producer was the key to national wealth and power, Chŏng advocated reforms that would increase the numbers of peasant cultivators in order to expand agricultural production, which he viewed as the main index of national wealth. Yet Chŏng criticized rulers of the past who tended to conceptualize their relationship to the people predominantly in terms of the extraction of revenue.[24] Chŏng pushed for equitable reform of the land distribution system and an end to the prevailing system of sharecropping not only as a means to weaken an entrenched and unproductive landed aristocracy, but also to ensure that peasants would have sufficient land to support their families.[25] There were, of course, important state interests at stake in these proposals. A rise in the number of peasant cultivators would not only increase government tax revenues, but also eliminate large classes of labor and military exemptions. Yet Chŏng seems to have felt strongly that attending to the material requirements of the peasantry was a critical prerequisite to the moral transformation of the populace.[26]

Orthodox Confucian thought during the mid-Chosŏn period tended to be dominated by highly theoretical, deeply philosophical approaches that had few practical implications for the lives of common men and women. Yet there were certain exceptions to this rule. For example, during the mid-seventeenth century, the scholar Yu Hyŏng-wŏn articulated far-reaching proposals for institutional and governmental reform. Yu's writings reveal a fairly acute awareness of social injustice—as manifested in his harsh criticism of slavery—and a correspondingly active engagement with the task of devising reforms that would more closely approximate the Mencian ideal of good government. Although they are not representative of the main current of Chosŏn statecraft thought of the time, Yu's ideas are nevertheless instructive because they help to delineate the boundaries of Confucian populism in the mid-Chosŏn period.

[23] Quoted in Pu Namch'ŏl, *Chosŏn sidae ch'il in ŭi chŏngch'i sasang* [The political thought of seven thinkers of the Chosŏn period] (Seoul: Sagyejŏl, 1996), p.63.

[24] Ibid.

[25] James B. Palais, "Han Yŏng-u's studies of early Chosŏn intellectual history," *Journal of Korean Studies* 2 (1980): 204–6. The views summarized above are those of the Korean historian Han Yŏng-u. It should be noted that Palais objects to Han's use of the concept '*minbonjŏk minju kukka*' 民本的民主國家 ('populist nation-state').

[26] Ibid., p.206.

Among his many proposals for governmental reform, Yu advocated a form of mass education in which public schools, funded by the local gentry, would be established at the village level for the benefit of the masses. As historian James Palais points out, Yu did not propose expansion of mass education out of a commitment to the egalitarian ideals underlying modern democratic education. Rather, the goal of his program was to "provide an initial demarcation point between scholars (*sa* 士) and the general population (*min* 民, the people) and a minimal level of moral education for all."[27] Yu compared his ideal society to a stalk of bamboo—an image that aptly captures the importance that even he attached to hierarchy and the maintenance of one's proper station in a moral sociopolitical order.[28] Although Yu's village school program was not realized in practice, it remains significant for its apparent recognition—however inchoate and fragmentary---of the importance of popular education as a mechanism for instilling in men and women of all classes basic ethics and a more expansive vision of their responsibilities in society. To be sure, Yu's ideas on educational reform, with their limited scope and continued adherence to traditional Confucian social hierarchies, remained very much an artifact of the dominant mid-Chosŏn intellectual milieu. On the other hand, they remain important as an early effort to spread the benefits of cultured living more widely.

Similarly, Yu's views on slavery, a characteristic feature of the Chosŏn labor structure, suggest a heightened sensitivity to egalitarian principles:

> Our country currently regards slaves as chattel. People are of one kind. How could there exist a principle of one person treating another as chattel? ... As for the King, he rules over the people on behalf of Heaven. Yet the country is our country and the people are our people. How could one harm our people by dividing them through designating a separate class of slaves?[29]

Palais notes that Yu did not actually mean to suggest that there are no distinctions among human beings, but only that they share in common a basic humanity that distinguishes them all from chattel.[30] As we will see below, this idea was picked up and expanded by Suun and was given a central place in his philosophy. Although Yu may not have been fully aware of the implications of his ideas on this point, it seems quite clear that they mirror the early stages of what in the West developed into an egalitarian ethic.

Although he is now becoming recognized for his sophisticated critique of Neo-Confucian metaphysics, the scholar Chŏng Yagyong is best known for his extensive contributions in the areas of government administration and political philosophy.[31] Worth noting in particular is Chŏng's novel assertion that there was a capacity among the common people that made it possible for them to select virtuous political leaders. Following a tradition established in the *Analects* and the *Mencius*, among other authoritative classical texts, Chŏng conceptualized ideal government as the extension of family ethics to the public sphere. Underlying this view was Chŏng's belief that endemic problems of corruption and misrule could only be eradicated by a change in

[27] James B. Palais, *Confucian statecraft and Korean institutions: Yu Hyŏngwŏn and the late Chosŏn dynasty* (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 1996), p.171.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Quoted in Kim Chŏngsin, "Shirhakp'adŭl ŭi sasangjŏk kyebo wa chŏn'gae" [The intellectual lineage and development of the Sirhak schools], *Han'guk sasangsa taegye* 5 (Sŏngnam: Han'guk Chŏngsin Munhwa Yonguwŏn, 1992), p.325. Although slaves attached to the central government were manumitted in 1801, the institution of private slaveholding was not abolished until 1894.

[30] Palais, *Confucian statecraft*, p.236.

[31] For a discussion of Chŏng's political thought, see Mark Setton, *Chŏng Yagyong: Korea's challenge to orthodox neo-Confucianism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp.120–2.

heart on the part of existing leaders resulting from a return to the practical ethics of classical Confucianism.

Alongside such appeals to high moral principle, Chŏng recommended in his early writings the implementation of a system of government based upon populist principles as offering a radical approach to the resolution of some of the more pressing political problems of the day. While his later writings do not elaborate on this idea, presumably because of his realistic assessment of the limited prospects for achieving radical institutional reform, Chŏng's "Treatise on Ideal Government" (*T'angnon* 湯論) clearly reveals an interest not only in reviving the ethical priorities of classical political humanism, but also in rethinking the existing form of government:

> How did the emperor come to exist? Was he sent down and inaugurated by Heaven? Or did he become emperor by springing up from the grassroots?
>
> Five houses formed a hamlet [*lin* 鄰], and the leader selected by these five became a hamlet chief. Five hamlets formed a village [*li* 里], and the leader selected by these five became a village chief. Five towns [*bi* 鄙] formed a district [*xian* 縣], and the leader selected by these five became a district chief. The representative selected by the district chiefs became a feudal lord, and the representative selected by the feudal lords became the emperor. The position of emperor was established by the people ... . In ancient times those below selected those above—this accords with the Way. Nowadays those above select those below—this contravenes the Way.[32]

Grounding his argument in an idealized understanding of the Zhou 周 dynasty political system, Chŏng employs the classical tradition of Confucian populism toward a critique of late Chosŏn politics. Yet Chŏng succeeds in transcending the conventional boundaries of the Mencian right to revolution with his claim that electoral power should be exercised by the people on a more or less permanent basis, a stance that reflects a great confidence in the ability of the people to select worthy political leadership.

Chŏng's emphasis on the popular will is informed by his understanding of the concept of *quan* 權 (power of discretion), which is in turn derived from his innovative reading of the following thought-provoking dialogue between Mencius and the famous sophist Shunyu Kun 淳于髡 of Qi 齊[33]:

> Shunyu Kun asked, "Is it a rule of propriety that men and women should not have contact when they give or receive things?"
>
> Mencius replied, "It is a rule of propriety."
>
> "Suppose your sister-in-law is drowning. Wouldn't you rescue her with your hand?"
>
> Mencius said, "Only the likes of a wild animal would not rescue his drowning sister-in-law. It is a rule of propriety for men and women not to touch hands when giving or receiving things, but it is *quan* (discretion) to rescue one's drowning sister-in-law."[34]

The issue in question here is whether there are situations in which it would be permissible to violate ritual norms in order to achieve some greater good.

[32] *T'angnon*, 24a–b, *Chŭngbo yoyudong chŏnsŏ* [The complete works of Chŏng Yagyong, supplemented and revised], 6 vols (Seoul: Kyŏngin Munhwasa, 1970), 1: 11.

[33] *Quan* is translated as 'peculiar exigency' by James Legge; D. C. Lau renders it as 'discretion'.

[34] *Mencius*, 4A17 (author's translation).

In the specific case posed by his interlocutor, Mencius maintains that it would be inhumane not to violate prescribed ritual to save one's drowning sister-in-law. The faculty that makes this possible is *quan*, the power of discretion that enables one to make moral choices between conflicting alternatives.[35]

Chŏng elevates the faculty of *quan* to a position of still greater significance than that ascribed to it by Mencius, claiming that the power to make moral choices is a defining attribute of humanity. Chŏng's confidence in the capacity of the people to make morally sound choices sprang from this conception of human nature, which was remarkably egalitarian for its time and place. He implied not only that the 'virtue of Heaven' lay within the reach of all, but also that even the unenlightened possessed the capacity to make enlightened moral choices in a given situation. It stands to reason that if *quan* can provide ordinary men and women with the moral insight to violate prescribed ritual to achieve a greater good, it is not a stretch to imagine that they could use it to elect virtuous leaders in the basic manner envisioned in Chŏng's "bottom up" theory of government. Whereas Chŏng's political theory builds in this way upon the institutional implications of Mencian populism, Tonghak thought explores their ramifications in the sphere of ethics, as we shall see below.

[35] Kwong-loi Shun explains *quan* as having "both the earlier meaning of weighing objects and the derived meaning of weighing the circumstances to arrive at an appropriate decision." Kwong-loi Shun, *Mencius and early Chinese thought* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), p.69.

Tonghak

As we have already noted, Kim Dae Jung characterized the Tonghak movement of the late-nineteenth century as embodying the ideal of Confucian populism within the structure of a movement ostensibly committed to social and political change along democratic lines. It is important to understand that this claim is controversial partly because it contradicts contemporaneous accounts asserting that Tonghak egalitarianism was a product of exposure to philosophical and religious ideas from the West. Writing in the June 1895 issue of the *Korean Repository*, for example, an unnamed Western observer who had personally witnessed the Tonghak peasant uprising treats the impetus of the movement in terms of exposure to foreign influences: "The people are getting some ideas of liberty by contact with the foreigner and his religion and they purpose no longer to submit to the misrule of rapacious officials and their hirelings."[36] This is not to suggest that contemporaneous Western accounts must necessarily be taken at face value. Scholarly consensus has yet to emerge regarding the nature and extent of foreign influence on Tonghak thought. On the other hand, there is intriguing evidence that the egalitarian ideas of Suun and Haewŏl found ample support in sources much closer to home.

In the discussion that follows, I will argue that Tonghak egalitarianism had deep roots in the Korean tradition of Confucian political humanism, whether or not Western thought (principally Catholicism) was the proximal

[36] "Seven months among the Tong Haks," *Korean Repository* (June 1895), p.207.

catalyst for what the writer quoted above termed "ideas of liberty." Tonghak thought refined and extended egalitarian tendencies in the Confucian tradition by giving them a central place in its religious philosophy. The result was a political and social vision that challenged the status quo while still retaining mainstream Confucian themes. As such, the Tonghak movement arguably presents the first case in Korean history of an integrated system of thought in which an egalitarian vision occupies a central position. Tonghak thought represents not only the culmination of an indigenous Korean trend toward increasingly egalitarian social relations, but also the culmination of what may, for the sake of argument, be termed a 'populist tradition' in Korea.

The Historical Context of Tonghak Thought

Prior to discussing Tonghak thought in detail, it may be useful to consider briefly the objective social, economic, and political forces that collectively formed the environment in which its ideas took shape. Scholars of the Tonghak movement and of Tonghak thought have identified two broad sets of formative influences in late-Chosŏn society: domestic unrest and foreign incursions.

On the domestic front, severe strains in the traditional Korean social order had become apparent by the nineteenth century. Politically, the ascendancy of *yangban* aristocrats over the monarch contributed to a decentralization of political power. If centrifugal forces in the system were apparent by the seventeenth century, these same forces threatened massive societal disintegration by the nineteenth. Reform attempts by relatively powerful monarchs such as Yŏngjo 英祖 and Chŏngjo 正祖 proved ephemeral as the internal logic of the Chosŏn political order seemed to lead inexorably toward greater diffusion of power away from the center. The effects of political decentralization were most visible in the financial system, where the central government faced endemic revenue shortfalls due to its inability to administer the tax system in a comprehensive and efficient manner.

Aside from chronic financial crises, the political difficulties of the state contributed to other economic ills. For example, the devolution of power toward the provinces gave rise to systemic corruption by local officials. Unchecked by central government censors, local officials and the petty functionaries who assisted them engaged in a variety of corrupt and extortionate practices, usually involving the tax-collection system. Official graft sparked fierce resentment among the peasants, who already faced severe hardships due to a declining agricultural economy. Meanwhile, in the social realm, the status boundaries implied in Confucian moral and ethical norms were breaking down, a process that made it increasingly difficult for the state to enforce the very idea of social boundaries.

On the external or foreign front, Korean society in the nineteenth century

faced a new and imposing threat from foreign powers seeking access to its borders. Sightings of Western steamships off the Korean coast had become increasingly common from the early decades of the nineteenth century. As some of the previous studies of the Tonghak movement have noted, relatively uneventful early incursions by Western ships into Korean waters proved to be harbingers of later, more violent, incidents. These later episodes gave rise to a climate of alarm among Korean élites and commoners alike.[37] Already riven by internal instability, the Korean state found itself forced to come to terms with the military and technological superiority of the West at a time when it had few resources available to divert to that task.

Meanwhile, Japan, which had been "opened" to the West by Commodore Perry in 1854, was beginning to flex its own imperial muscles as it sought to subject Korea to the same system of unequal treaties to which Perry had subjected it. To the Korean court, which had always regarded the cultural development of its realm as superior to that of Tokugawa Japan, Japanese resurgence was naturally met with contempt. Unfortunately, contempt proved no adequate substitute for responsible reform. In short, the regime continued to founder, buffeted by forces both internal and external.

From the perspective of Korean officials, the threat from the West was very real. Informed Koreans were only too aware of recent troubles in China involving foreign powers: the Opium Wars and the Taiping Rebellion. Like their Qing Chinese counterparts, Korean officials were sceptical of the superficially peaceable claims of the Americans, British, and Russians who sought access to their borders, for they had observed in China a tendency for guns and cannon to follow where bibles and trade ships had gone before. This made it difficult for them to accept without scepticism the proposition that Western powers were only interested in commerce. In any case, commerce remained a subject about which the Korean government was deeply ambivalent.

Official attitudes toward commerce were closely paralleled by those toward Catholicism, where open hostility was the norm. Catholicism was viewed by Korean officials as a barbarous and dangerous doctrine, largely because conversion to it was normally followed by the destruction of the Confucian ancestral tablets associated with ancestral rites. No good Confucian could suffer such an offense, for ancestral tablets were regarded as one of the preeminent symbols of Confucian morality.[38] As if it were not objectionable enough in its own right, Catholicism was widely viewed as a proxy for Western thought in general and thus an even graver threat to the dominant Confucian ideology that had buttressed the Korean social and political order for centuries. Yet in the mid-nineteenth century Catholicism was not a particularly new threat. In response to the early successes of French priests working in Korea, the preaching of Catholicism and the distribution of its literature had been proscribed in 1785. After that time, persecution of catholics followed a steady course, with nationwide campaigns occurring in 1791, 1801, and 1839. The last of these persecutions had prompted a vigorous

[37] See, for example, Shin Yong-ha, "Establishment of Tonghak and Ch'oe Che-u" *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 3 (1990): 84.

[38] Benjamin B. Weems, *Reform, rebellion, and the heavenly way* (Tucson, Ariz.: University of Arizona Press, 1964), p.5.

protest from France and an equally defiant Korean reply.

Quite apart from the challenge to Korean sovereignty posed by aggressive Western imperialist powers and their "contemptible" ideology, the forces pressing in upon Korea threatened change of a more fundamental sort. That is, the foreign incursions into China, Japan, and Korea during the nineteenth century presaged the end of the traditional Sino-centric world order in which China occupied the center with Korea relegated to a semi-peripheral and Japan a peripheral position.[39] Such was the domestic and international context from which the Tonghak movement emerged.

Before turning to a discussion of early Tonghak thought it should be mentioned that its relation to the later Tonghak peasant uprising is complicated. It is a major weakness of many previous studies of Tonghak that they tend to consider Tonghak thought as an undifferentiated mass of ideas and values, and do not distinguish carefully between the respective intellectual contributions of Suun and Haewŏl, or between the contributions of these early figures and those of later Tonghak thinkers. As will be seen below, Haewŏl carried on the intellectual legacy of Suun in a loyal manner and did much to perpetuate Tonghak thought by placing the movement on a more solid organizational foundation. Yet Haewŏl also left his own distinctive imprint upon the Tonghak intellectual tradition, and his contributions must be considered carefully in the light of both earlier and later developments. Moreover, Haewŏl shared significant differences with the main leader of the Tonghak peasant uprising, Chŏn Pongjun 全琫準, over matters of political strategy. In addition, there were many other factors that intervened between the time of Suun's death in 1864 and the uprising in 1894–95.[40] Add to this the passage of time and it seems clear that attempts to draw direct causal links between the egalitarian thought of Suun and the political act of rebellion thirty years later are inconclusive at best.

Tonghak Egalitarianism: Philosophical Concepts[41]

I turn now to a more detailed discussion of Tonghak thought. In particular, I will address the main ideas encompassing what may be regarded as Tonghak's egalitarian vision. Tonghak egalitarianism was rooted mainly in the concepts *sich'ŏnju* 侍天主 (bearing/serving/attending God in oneself), *ch'ŏnsim chŭk insim* 天心即人心 (the heart/mind of humankind is the heart/mind of Heaven), *sain yŏch'ŏn* (serve humankind as Heaven), *insich'ŏn* 人侍天 [humankind is Heaven], and *innaech'ŏn* (humankind and Heaven are one). The first two of these terms were introduced by Suun, the second two were introduced by Haewŏl, and the last was introduced by Haewŏl's successor Son Pyŏnghŭi 孫秉熙 (Ŭiam 義菴; 1861–1922), respectively. Taken together, they form a logical progression extending from the recognition that every person bears certain heavenly attributes (*sich'ŏnju* and

[39] A useful discussion of the dialectical relationship between internal and external threats to the Korean social order can be found in Kim Dongno, "Peasants, state, and landlords: National crisis and the transformation of agrarian society in pre-colonial Korea" vol.1 (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1994), pp.115–16. In particular, Kim analyzes the Japanese threat in terms of a mixed bag of hazard and opportunity that affected different societal groups in different ways. For state élites, Kim argues, the Japanese invasion constituted a threat to their political power, but also an opportunity to further consolidate power *vis-à-vis* the central government. For landlords and wealthy peasants, Japanese incursion into Korea promised greater opportunities for commercialized agriculture and consequent accumulation of agricultural capital. For poor peasants and conservative Confucian literati, Kim maintains, the Japanese presence was a "source of ontological insecurity as well as economic hardship." Of the three groups, it was the last one that was most likely to be represented among Tonghak believers. Not surprisingly, the peculiar brand of anti-Japanese sentiment found in the Tonghak community tended to track the specific concerns mentioned by Kim for this last group.

[40] Government statistics from the late Chosŏn period suggest that very few of the more than sixty major popular uprisings that occurred between 1860 and 1895 had as their principal object either the yangban class or the Chosŏn class system in general. See Kim Dongno, "Peasants," pp.55–61. This suggests that Suun's egalitarian ideas did not translate into direct attacks on the political and social systems either in his lifetime, or in the immediate wake of his death. If such direct consequences failed to materialize in his own time, it is doubtful that we should expect to find direct and verifiable connections between Suun's egalitarianism and a peasant uprising occurring thirty years later.

[41] For a concise English-language overview of Tonghak thought, see Kim Yong Choon, "An analysis of early Ch'ŏndogyo thought," *Korea Journal* 17.10 (Oct.1977): 41–6.

ch'ŏnsim chŭk insim) to advocacy of the normative proposition that each person should thus be treated in a manner commensurate with his or her divine nature (*sain yŏch'ŏn*), and finally to the ultimate realization that treating people this way elevates all of humanity so that humankind becomes practically inseparable from Heaven (*insich'ŏn* and *innaech'ŏn*).

Previous studies of Tonghak thought have addressed the various concepts at the basis of Tonghak egalitarianism, but never in the context of a broader study of egalitarianism in the Sino-Korean intellectual tradition. Moreover, several of the existing studies are marred by a tendency to conflate in various ways the five ideas mentioned above or to blur the lines of their logical or temporal progression. Among non-specialists, for example, it is axiomatic that Suun introduced the idea of *innaech'ŏn* into the Korean intellectual milieu; Kim Dae Jung is by no means alone in perpetuating this error. In fact, Suun's writings do not contain the phrase, though some have argued that its major conceptual element was present in the form of the *ch'ŏnsim chŭk insim* ideal, which Suun had advocated prior to his execution in 1864.[42] The ethical implications of Suun's egalitarian vision were only realized under the leadership of his successor, Haewŏl, for it was he who introduced the ethical norm of *sain yŏch'ŏn*. Although Tonghak humanism arguably reached its most profound form in the guise of the *innaech'ŏn* ethic, this development occurred much later, under the leadership of Ŭiam, who took control of the devastated movement in the wake of the failed peasant uprising of 1894–95. For better or for worse, prolonged exposure to Western thought and institutions had, by this time, rendered more problematic the task of separating indigenous from foreign egalitarian ideas. Consequently, I have chosen to focus on Haewŏl's *sain yŏch'ŏn* standard as the apogee of an egalitarian trend in traditional Korean thought.

In spite of Suun's claims to divine inspiration, most scholars believe that Tonghak thought represents a combination of elements inspired by various traditions ranging from Buddhism to Confucianism to Catholicism, with Taoist and Shamanistic incantations included in the mix.[43] Notwithstanding this heavy debt to East Asian and Western intellectual and religious traditions, we will soon see that Tonghak thought also contained a number of features that were unprecedented.

[42] Indeed neither in the writings of Suun nor in those of Haewŏl do we find any mention of the concept of *innaech'ŏn*. See Shin Ilch'ŏl, *Tonghak sasang ŭi ihae*, p.47.

[43] See, e.g., Ch'oe Tonghŭi, *Tonghak ŭi sasang kwa undong*, pp.69–70; Shin Ilch'ŏl, *Tonghak sasang ŭi ihae*, pp.141–58; John B. Duncan, "The emergence of the Tonghak religion" in *Sourcebook of Korean civilization*, vol.2. *From the seventeenth century to the modern period*, ed. Peter H. Lee (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp.313–14; Susan S. Shin, "The Tonghak movement: from enlightenment to revolution" *Korean Studies Forum* 5 (Winter–Spring, 1978–79): 2–3; Susan S. Shin, "Tonghak thought: The roots of revolution" *Korea Journal* 19.9 (Sept. 1979): 11; Shin Yong-ha, "Establishment of Tonghak," pp. 95–6; and Weems, *Heavenly way*, pp.7–12.

Tonghak Metaphysics [44]

In terms of its metaphysical dimensions, the truly innovative element of Tonghak thought is its belief in the unity of Heaven and humankind. This unity is implied in the concepts *sich'ŏnju*, *ch'ŏnsim chŭk insim*, *insich'ŏn*, and *innaech'ŏn*. The practical effect of this doctrinal progression was to shift the focus of attention away from distant deities in the direction of humankind itself.

[44] I am indebted to Kim Yong Choon for his generous advice regarding the translation of various key terms pertaining to Tonghak metaphysics.

1. *Sich'ŏnju* [45]

Variously rendered as "bearing," "serving," or "attending God within oneself," the doctrine of *sich'ŏnju* has frequently been attributed to Western, specifically Catholic influences. While there may be some overlap with the God of Catholicism, *sich'ŏnju* is also consistent with Mencian thought.[46] Suun explained the doctrine of *sich'ŏnju* as follows:

> Serving [*si*] means having the spirit internally and experiencing the transformation of *ki* [vital force, energy] externally.[47] The people of our age should all realize that one cannot deviate from this. *Ju* [as in *ch'ŏnju* (God)] refers to veneration and devotion as in the service of one's parents.[48]

It is significant that, in the passage quoted above, Suun sets forth filial piety as the standard by which one venerates God. In one sense, this claim is hardly surprising. After all, Suun implies that a state of divinity is not beyond reach of the sincere practitioner of his doctrine. Here Suun implicitly endows the relationship with God with an ethical dimension by using the standard of serving one's parents as the standard for serving God. In this way he sows the seeds of the *sain yŏch'ŏn* ethical standard, but does not explore its implications in detail, choosing instead to emphasize religious transformation.

Attaining the state of supreme holiness to which Ch'oe alludes, it should be noted, was not regarded as a function of religious devotion alone, but also required self-cultivation. It has been argued that the precise method advocated by Suun, "preserving one's heart/mind and rectifying one's vital force (*susim chŏnggi* 修心正氣)," [49] bears similarity to conventional Neo-Confucian formulae, most notably Cheng Yi's 程頤 "rectifying one's heart/mind and nourishing one's nature."[50] On closer inspection, however, Suun's method of moral self-cultivation seems closer to a formulation set forth by Mencius: "Those who fathom their heart/mind know their nature. Those who know their nature know Heaven. To preserve one's heart/mind and nourish one's nature is the way to serve Heaven."[51] This identification of Heaven with human nature is not unique to Mencius, but represents a theme subsequently explored in other classics.[52] In the celebrated opening passage of the *Doctrine of the Mean* (Zhongyong 中庸), for example, this theme finds its way into an intriguing formulation of moral self-cultivation: "What Heaven has imparted is called (human) nature; to follow this nature is called the Way; training in the Way is called education."[53] Here, particularly in the thought

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[45] "Nonhangmun" 論學文 [Discourse on learning], *Ch'ŏndogyo kyŏngjŏn* [Chŏndogyo canon] (Seoul: Ch'ŏndogyo Chungong Ch'ongbu, 1961), p.12.

[46] Even if one believes that the egalitarian emphasis in Tonghak was borrowed from Catholicism, it is still the case that such ideas were incorporated into a philosophy that remained thoroughly Korean. In this connection, one notes the strong anti-Western tendencies in Tonghak thought as well as the consistent efforts by Suun to differentiate between his "Eastern thought" and Catholicism: "The Western religion is similar to our religion but also different. They worship a 'God' who is not real. The forms of the truth may be similar, but their doctrines are really different ... . Our way emphasizes accomplishing things through natural action. If one cultivates his mind, balances his energy, receives the divine teaching, and follows the divine nature, things will be accomplished naturally. But the Westerners have no order in their words and no pure concern for God. They pray really for their flesh, and they have no effective God. In their doctrine there is no real teaching of God. They have form, but no substance. They seem to think, but they have no incantation. Their way is vain, and their doctrine does not really deal with God. Thus, how can one say that there is no difference between our way and their way?" "Nonhangmun," *Sourcebook of Korean tradition*, p.319 (Kim Yong Choon's translation).

[47] The concept of *ki* [or *gi*, as in *susim chŏnggi* (Ch.: *qi* 氣)] is conventionally translated "material force" when it occurs in the context of Neo-Confucian metaphysics. Nonetheless, the ethereal connotations of *ki* as encountered in Tonghak metaphysics are better rendered as "vital force" when applied to humankind, and "energy" when applied to the Tonghak deity or to Heaven.

[48] "Nonhangmun," *Ch'ŏndogyo kyŏngjŏn*, pp.12–13.

[49] Ibid., p.8; see also "Sudŏngmun" 修德文 [On cultivating virtue], *Ch'ŏndogyo kyŏngjŏn*, p.22.

[50] Susan S. Shin, "Tonghak movement," p.18.

[51] *Mencius*, 7A1 (author's translation). Indeed, Suun himself seems conscious of a connection between *susim chŏnggi* and the Four Virtues of classical Confucianism as enumerated by Mencius. In his "Sudŏngmun," Suun writes candidly about the relationship between his teachings and pre-Qin Confucianism: "Humanity, righteousness, propriety and wisdom are the teachings of the early sages. Cultivating one's heart/mind and rectifying one's vital force is nothing more than my modification." "Sudŏngmun," *Ch'ŏndogyo kyŏngjŏn*, p.22. Commenting on this passage, Shin Ilch'ŏl argues that *susim chŏnggi* is not /Suun's own creation, but is in fact only a modification of traditional Confucian teachings in that it merely emphasizes the practice of the Four Virtues. Shin Ilch'ŏl, *Tonghak sasang ŭi ihae*, p.51. Although I am not so eager to conclude that *susim chŏnggi* is nothing more than the practice of the Four Virtues, it does seem abundantly clear that Suun intends in this passage to affirm the Confucian origins of one of his core teachings.

of Mencius, we see the seeds of something very important: an effort to link moral self-cultivation to the service of Heaven by means of the assertion that human nature is actually endowed by Heaven. Although largely undeveloped until Suun came along, the implications of this relationship were very significant because they pushed the concept of moral self-cultivation into the religious realm.

Yet Tonghak thought still manages to extend the limits of classical Confucian humanism. For one thing, the notion of attending Heaven in oneself had not been directly articulated prior to Suun, though it could certainly be argued that a similar message is merely implicit in Mencius' assertion that to nourish or preserve the heart/mind is to serve Heaven. While the idea of serving Heaven plays a relatively minor role in Confucian humanism, it was an essential part of native Korean religion. In this sense the method of self-cultivation embodied in the concepts *sich'ŏnju* and *susim chŏnggi* represents a confluence of the Confucian tradition of moral self-cultivation and the Heaven worship of native Korean religion.[54] The synthesis of these traditions in Tonghak thought is even more complete than that between religion and moral self-cultivation reflected in Mencius' call to "nourish the heart/mind and thereby serve Heaven." As we will see below, this union between religion and self-cultivation, which surfaces in the writings of Mencius and especially those of Suun, takes on a broader ethical dimension in the *sain yŏch'ŏn* ideal of Haewŏl.

2. *O sim chŭk yŏ sim* 吾心卽汝心—My heart/mind is none other than your heart/mind[55]

   Ch'ŏnsim chŭk insim—The heart/mind of Heaven is none other than the heart/mind of humankind[56]

The first of these statements is very important since it reportedly came to Suun as a voice from within and provided the initial inspiration for the more objective rephrasing we find in the second. As with the doctrine of *sich'ŏnju*, the idea of unity between Ch'oe's own heart/mind and that of Heaven is reflective of the classical Confucian understanding of the relationship between Heaven and human beings but with an important modification. Whereas the *Mencius* and the *Doctrine of the Mean* speak of unity between Heaven and human nature, Suun invokes the broader category of the heart/mind, which encompasses a controlling subjective capacity not implied in the concept of human nature. The effect of using this more expansive category is to broaden the scope of interaction between Heaven and human beings.

It should be noted that humankind and Heaven were not viewed as co-equal in Suun's thought.[57] As Mencius had done before, Suun taught that every human being possesses the inherent capacity to experience an internal transformation through which he or she achieves a certain unity with Heaven. It is in this sense that he asserted that the heart/mind of Heaven is the heart/mind of humankind (*ch'ŏnsim chŭk insim*).

[52] It is also important to recognize that Mencius developed his philosophy in the shadow of Confucius, who in turn claimed to be a mere defender of a long-established lineage. From the early Zhou dynasty onward, Chinese texts such as the *Classic of Poetry* and the *Classic of History* dwelt upon the existence of *Shang di* 上帝 (Supreme Ruler) and his influence in society and politics. In the *Analects*, there is a visible shift in the focus of attention from *Shang di* (whom Confucius replaces with a more impersonal *Tian*) to the world of human affairs. In changing the emphasis in this way, however, Confucius stopped short of discussing issues surrounding the relationship between Heaven and humankind. In the *Mencius*, by contrast, we find a greater readiness to discuss abstract issues, among which we find the first mention of an explicit link between Heaven and humanity. Mencius ties these concepts together by means of his theory of moral self-cultivation. Significantly, his emphasis falls decisively on the human side of the equation.

[53] *Doctrine of the Mean*, 1:1.

[54] See Ch'oe Tonghŭi, *Tonghak ŭi sasang kwa undong*, pp.69–70. According to Ch'oe, the monotheistic deity concept of Tonghak could well have roots in early Korean religious tendencies described in the *Dongyi chuan* 東夷傳 section of the *Houhanshu* 后漢書, which includes an intriguing description of what appears to be a formal state sacrifice to *Tian*.

[55] "Nonhangmun," *Ch'ŏndogyo kyŏngjŏn*, p.8.

[56] Ibid., p.13.

[57] Kim Yongdŏk, *Chosŏn hugi sasangsa yŏn'gu* (Seoul: Ŭlyu Munhwasa, 1983), p.266.

[58] *Mencius*, 3A3.

The implications of this doctrine were far-reaching. If the will of Heaven was knowable to the average man, woman, or child, then this would render the intervention by the state into the sphere of private morality problematic if not wholly unnecessary. One further notes in this connection that the discernment of the will of Heaven—'the Way' in Confucian parlance—had long been regarded as the exclusive preserve of intellectual élites. That is to say, moral and ethical cultivation in their highest forms were thought to apply only to the literati. For the perpetually benighted masses, criminal sanctions were thought to be a more realistic method of social control. Achieving the 'virtue of Heaven', meanwhile, depended in part on careful study of certain classical texts, which were thought to embody a close approximation of the original articulation of the sayings of sages who exemplified the Way. In this sense it was not only the difficult work of moral cultivation that divided the common man or woman from Heaven's will but also 2,400 years of classical scholarship in the Confucian tradition—sophisticated comprehension of which realistically lay beyond the grasp of all but the scions of aristocratic privilege. By Suun's time, the bitter reality was that moral cultivation, and by extension access to virtue, had in the Confucian tradition become associated as much with mastery of this burgeoning body of scholarship as with moral and ethical development *per se*.

Centuries before Tonghak appeared on the scene, Mencius had taught that all men could realize the moral and ethical ideals embodied by the mythical sage kings Yao and Shun precisely because human nature is endowed by Heaven. Mencius promoted this understanding of universal human moral potential alongside his advocacy of an expanded educational system.[58] Yet as we have seen, the state-orthodoxy that prevailed in late-Chosŏn Korea, which placed a premium on intellectual mastery of the Classics as the gateway to success in the civil service examination system, bore little resemblance on this point to the understanding set forth in the classical teachings of Mencius. In view of this fact, the close compatibility between Mencian political humanism and the Tonghak concept of *ch'ŏnsim chŭk insim* may be viewed as the effective recovery of a central aspect of the Mencian tradition.

It is also worth noting that Suun's thought on this point reveals some similarity to Chŏng Yagyong's critique of Zhu Xi's 朱熹 theory of self-cultivation. Through his emphasis on the "investigation of the principle in things and affairs," Zhu Xi implied that intellectual abilities were an essential component of the self-cultivation process. To Chŏng, Zhu Xi's view merely perpetuated an assumption common among élites that formal education conveyed special advantages in the pursuit of virtue and, by extension, in the creation of enlightened leaders. Chŏng, on the other hand, identified sincerity of the will—a quality that would be more readily accessible to the general population than formal education—as the starting point for moral enlightenment. In so doing, he relegated the refined cognitive faculties

claimed by educated élites to a position of secondary importance in the process. Indeed, as we have seen in our discussion of his theory of "government from below," one of Chŏng's most important contributions to Chosŏn political philosophy was an unprecedented degree of confidence in the ability of the common people to choose virtuous and capable political leadership.[59]

Suun also shifted the responsibility for national welfare away from the élite by emphasizing a form of individual spiritual transformation that was more widely accessible than the intellectual refinement required for Neo-Confucian self-cultivation. Recounting the events surrounding his reception of the Tonghak doctrine in a work entitled "P'odŏngmun 布德文" (On Propagating Virtue), Suun describes feeling chilled and shaking, uncertain whether he was sick or overcome by a Shamanic trance.[60] He writes that he was comforted by the voice of God, who gave him a spiritual symbol in the shape of the Great Ultimate (*t'aegŭk* 太極)—represented by the characters *kung kung* 弓弓—with which he was to deliver humanity from the clutches of pervasive moral and physical sickness. After writing the *kung kung* symbol upon a piece of paper, Suun ate it. His own health miraculously restored in this manner, Suun explains that he began to apply his cure to others. Observing that individual responses to his cure varied, Suun reports that people were healed or not depending upon their sincerity (*sŏng* 誠) and respect (*kyŏng* 敬) and by whether or not they were willing to follow the path of virtue (*sundodŏk* 順道德).[61] As he reflected further upon this strange course of events, Suun came to see that his doctrine bore direct relevance for overcoming the myriad internal and external threats confronting the nation:

> Our country is full of bad diseases, and the people have no peace. Suffering is the lot of the people. It is said that the West wins and takes what-ever it fights for, and there is nothing in which it cannot succeed. If the whole world perishes, my lips will burst into lamentation. How can the plan of protecting the nation and securing peace for the people be made?[62]

It is significant that, in lamenting the plight of his country, Suun continues to speak in terms of sickness and disease. This is no mere literary convention. On the contrary, it seems from his extension of the metaphor of pathology from the individual to the country at large that Suun believed that the spiritual salvation of the individual man, woman, and child was the key to the salvation of the nation as a whole.

In this respect Tonghak doctrine marked a clear break from the Kingly Way followed by orthodox Neo-Confucians. A key tenet of this prevailing political philosophy, as JaHyun Kim Haboush explains, was that the fate of the nation depended fundamentally upon the moral cultivation of the monarch:

> As for the ruler, naturally, expectations were higher. As his sphere of influence was the widest, his cultivation of self correspondingly was more crucial. As the ultimate source of national well-being as well as harmony between the moral order in the universe and the ethical and social order in

[59] For further discussion on this point, see Setton, *Chŏng Yagyong*, p.120.

[60] "P'odŏngmun," *Ch'ŏndogyo kyŏngjŏn*, pp.3–5.

[61] Ibid., pp.4–5.

[62] Ibid. The translation is from Kim Yong Choon, "On spreading virtue," *Sourcebook of Korean civilization*, p.317.

> the kingdom, the rectification of the imperial mind acquired a central importance. Thus the statement by Fan Tsu-yü, an eleventh-century Sung scholar: "Order and disorder in the world all depend on the heart-and-mind of the ruler. If his heart-and-mind are correct, then the myriad affairs of the court will not be incorrect." Hence, the rectification of the imperial mind emerged as a task that called for the concerted efforts of all concerned, the ruler as well as all his officials.[63]

By linking national salvation not to rectification of the royal mind, but to the sincerity and respect of individual men and women, Suun's doctrine underscored the significance of the average man and woman. By appealing to the Confucian virtues of sincerity and respect, moreover, Suun underscored the deep connections between his doctrine and the prevailing tradition. Operating within this narrow space, Tonghak doctrine essentially carved out a political role for the common people that, while clearly an extension of Mencian populism, nevertheless assumed a form unprecedented in Korean political thought.

To be sure, Tonghak thought did not advocate radical political change or even popular activism. Rather, the transformation that Suun envisioned was to occur in the heart and mind of the individual. Political and social transformation was to follow the ethical transformation of humankind. Suun used the concept of "returning to oneness" (*tonggwi ilch'e* 同歸一體) to signify this transformation. Through this notion, Tonghak thought tapped into a broader East Asian tradition of mystical organicism extending back to the concept of "forming one body with all things" (*manmul ilch'e* 萬物一體) espoused by the iconoclastic Confucian thinker Wang Yangming 王陽明.

3. *Insich'ŏn* [64]

We turn now to the philosophical contributions of the second great Tonghak luminary, Haewŏl, to the Tonghak understanding of the relationship between Heaven and humankind. Among Haewŏl's writings we find the following teaching:

> Heaven, earth, and human beings, these three are but one principle and material force.
>
> Humans are a lump of Heaven, and Heaven is the essence of all things.
>
> Humankind is Heaven and Heaven is humankind; outside of humankind there is no Heaven, and outside of Heaven there is no humankind.[65]

The phrase "principle and material force" has unmistakable roots in Neo-Confucian cosmology. In fact, Haewŏl's invocation of principle and material force demonstrates his use in general of a Neo-Confucian philosophical framework, though with a slightly different emphasis. Zhu Xi and his followers tended to emphasize principle over Heaven, even while equating the two. Haewŏl, by contrast, makes a subtle shift in emphasis from principle and material force to the connection between Heaven and humankind.

In claiming that "Humankind is Heaven" (*insich'ŏn*) Haewŏl brings a

63 JaHyun Kim Haboush, *A heritage of kings: one man's monarchy in the Confucian world* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp.9–10.

64 *Ch'ŏn, chi, in, kwisin, ŭmyang* 天地人鬼神陰陽, in *Ch'ŏndogyo kyŏngjŏn*, p.123.

65 Ibid.

critical innovation to the Confucian tradition's understanding of humanity. Whereas he began with a subtle shift of emphasis within a Neo-Confucian philosophical paradigm, he manages in the end to transcend that framework in arriving at a revolutionary new synthesis where barriers between Heaven and human spirituality are removed once and for all. In this respect Haewŏl anticipates the concept of *innaech'ŏn*, which would be articulated later by Son Pyŏnghŭi.

Tonghak Ethics

In the realm of ethics, Tonghak thought also set forth a vision that was in many respects unprecedented in the Korean tradition. For our purposes, the prioritization of an egalitarian social ideal is the most important of these original contributions. In the context of a broader study of Tonghak thought, Tonghak ethics are important because they spell out the practical implications of the identification of Heaven with human beings. Other than emphasizing the four virtues of Confucianism, Suun had little to say regarding interpersonal relationships. As he consciously incorporated established Confucian virtues into his own philosophico-religious system, Suun emphasized moral self-cultivation and religious practice over practical ethics. In short, the teachings of the founder emphasized internal attitudes, even where he described the unity of Heaven and humankind with the phrases *ch'ŏnsim chŭk insim*, or else *o sim chŭk yŏ sim*. Although principles of egalitarian social ethics are clearly implied in these statements, they were never developed explicitly.

All this was to change when Suun was executed in 1864 on suspicion of inciting a peasant rebellion. Ch'oe was succeeded by his leading disciple, Haewŏl.[66] A gifted organizer and evangelist, Haewŏl lacked the extensive classical education of the founder. It was a consequence of this absence of formal education, perhaps, that caused Haewŏl to place considerably more emphasis on practical ethics than on metaphysics. Haewŏl's most important contribution was the principle that one should "serve humankind as you would serve Heaven" (*sain yŏch'ŏn*). As indicated above, the articulation of this ideal represented a turning point in Korean thought because it awakened an egalitarian social vision that lay dormant in Mencius' dictum "preserving your heart/mind is serving Heaven." The emergence of the *sain yŏch'ŏn* standard is also important because it represents a meeting point between orthodox Confucian humanism and native Korean religious tendencies.

The *sain yŏch'ŏn* ethical standard proceeds logically from the Tonghak understanding of the unity of Heaven and humankind as expressed in Suun's phrase *si ch'ŏnju* (attending God in oneself). The ethical mandate followed this logic: all human beings possess the potential for divinity and must accordingly be treated in a manner commensurate with their god-like nature. The details were fleshed out in December, 1888, when Haewŏl issued to local

[66] For an overview of Haewŏl's life and thought, see generally O Munhwan, *Sarami hanŭl ida: Haewŏl ŭi ttŭt kwa sasang* [Humankind is Heaven: Haewŏl's intentions and thought] (Seoul: Sol, 1996).

units (*p'o* 包) a formal statement of religious and ethical principles that were to be upheld within the Tonghak community:

> 1. Treat all persons at home as God. Do filial duty to your parents with all your strength, respect your husbands wholly, and love your children and daughters-in-law. Regard your servants as your own children, love even animals, and do not cut young trees. When your parents are angry, do not provoke their mind further. Do not strike your children, and do not let them cry. Since even little children bear divinity, striking them is like striking God—and striking children severely may cause their death. Do not make loud noises. Make an effort to realize harmony. If you practice reverence for God and filial piety, God will be pleased and bless you. Therefore, serve God with all your heart and strength.
>
> 2. Do not spit on the ground, for the earth is the face of mother nature.
>
> 3. When you go to bed and rise from the bed, meditate and pray.
>
> 4. Do not mix old and new foods. Be thankful when you eat.
>
> 5. When you have breakfast, set aside one bowl of food and give thanks to God.
>
> 6. When you leave home and when you return and when you receive gifts from someone, act as if you were reporting to God.
>
> 7. Do not eat in an unclean bowl, and maintain an alert and reverential attitude before meals.
>
> If you do not forget these seven items and report to God in all your actions, you shall be free from illness and evil. Have sincerity, reverence, and faith. Then you shall experience healing and have a speedy understanding of the great truth.[67]

Haewŏl goes on to address a number of practical concerns related to cleanliness and hygiene, including treating the earth, which he regards as the face of God, with appropriate respect. His followers are advised to call upon God when performing various activities. Haewŏl's overriding concern with the practical realm is evident throughout.

One notes an obvious tension between Haewŏl's basic message, which is one of social equality, and the Confucian terminology he uses to express that message.[68] Yet the notion of treating all persons at home as God was without precedent in the Confucian tradition, which is based on hierarchy and differential treatment according to status. The ramifications stemming from Tonghak's modification of the hierarchical social ethics of state-sponsored Confucian orthodoxy were profound. Benjamin Weems underscores the significance of Tonghak egalitarianism in these terms:

> If every sincerely faithful individual, regardless of wealth, education, or social position, was to be looked upon and treated as being equal with God, the traditional patriarchal social controls of Confucianism, the political and social inequities perpetuated by the ruling *yangban* class, and the very class structure and factionalism which formed the basis of governmental control by cliques of self-seeking officials would all be wiped out.[69]

[67] "Nae sudomun" [On cultivating the Way in the home], translated by Kim Yong Choon in *Sourcebook of Korean civilization*, pp. 321–2.

[68] Susan S. Shin and others argue that rigidly conservative elements of Confucianism also figured prominently in Tonghak thought. See, for example, Susan S. Shin, "Tonghak thought," pp.15–16, 18–19. Toward an explanation of this unresolved tension, it should be understood that Suun and Haewŏl had many constituencies to satisfy: poor and illiterate peasants, educated (often fallen) *yangban*, and the government (which had to be persuaded that Tonghak was not a direct threat to its existence). In fact, it is possible that some of these unresolved tensions were related to tactical considerations quite unrelated to efforts toward devising an internally consistent system of thought.

[69] Weems, *Heavenly way*, pp.12–13.

It should be noted that the "traditional patriarchal social controls of Confucianism" spoken of by Weems were those reflected in the particular formulation of Confucianism sponsored by the state. As this paper seeks to demonstrate, the classical Confucianism of Confucius and Mencius also contained liberal and egalitarian messages that served to moderate some of its more hierarchal and authoritarian themes. It is my argument that these liberal aspects of the broader Confucian tradition were recovered from obscurity and perpetuated anew in the ethical norms promoted by Suun and Haewŏl.

Although children had long been the objects of much attention in the Confucian tradition, they became elevated to a position of unprecedented prominence in Tonghak thought. In his *Kwŏnhak ka* 勸學歌, for example, Suun urges his followers to "Honor God with utmost sincerity." He then entreats them to "Instruct your wives and children too and never forget these words."[70] In this way, he makes it clear that the Tonghak message is not intended for the consumption of educated élites only, but is capable of comprehension by all, even by the lowliest child.

The importance of children was further elaborated in the ethical norms proposed in Haewŏl's "Nae sudomun" 內修道文, which is quoted above. Haewŏl cautions Tonghak adherents as follows: "Do not strike your children, and do not let them cry. Since even little children bear divinity, striking them is like striking God—and striking children may cause their death." At the most basic level, Haewŏl's is a practical message and seems motivated in part by a common concern for the physical well-being of the child. The mere invocation of child welfare in this context is enough to remind one of the Mencian claim that no person could bear to see a child about to fall into a well and not feel compassion.[71] Just as the original goodness of human nature was established through its compassion for children in the thought of Mencius, the moral and ethical standing of Tonghak followers was to be determined in significant part by their benign treatment of children.

Haewŏl's equation of children with God also forms an interesting counterpoint to another famous passage in the *Mencius* that sets forth standards for social justice centered around care of the elderly: "When the elderly wear silk clothing and eat meat and the common people do not have to endure hunger or cold, their ruler must necessarily be a true King."[72] On one level, the implication of this passage is that the enjoyment of a comfortable standard of living by those who are old and frail is clear evidence of prosperity in the society at large. At the same time, the Mencian approach could be interpreted as implying that the needs of the elderly take precedence over those of other groups. Clearly, this second reading would be entirely consistent with the general thrust of Confucian social hierarchies.

Tonghak ethical norms mirror Mencian social justice by placing high priority on satisfying the needs of relatively weak social groups. The fact that the favored group are children rather than the elderly, however, represents

[70] *Ch'ŏndogyo kyŏngjŏn*, pp.103–4.

[71] *Mencius*, 2A6.

[72] *Mencius*, 1A3 (author's translation).

an intriguing counterbalance to the traditional Confucian social hierarchy. The rhetorical as well as the practical implications of this reversal for egalitarian social relations in Korea are noteworthy.

Yet some scholars have suggested that the egalitarian impulses in Tonghak thought have been overstated or, at the very least, were moderated by equally authoritarian tendencies.[73] Indeed, Tonghak thought, while radically egalitarian in comparison to the state-sponsored Confucianism of the Chosŏn dynasty, remained a product of a patriarchal society. Given this reality, it should hardly be surprising to find vestiges of prevailing social values and practices. On the contrary, the fact that it emerged from within a society characterized by gender- and status-based discrimination makes the egalitarian aspects of Tonghak thought all the more impressive. Among the more striking elements of Tonghak thought are its support of learning by all individuals and its enlightened view of gender relations.

As for learning, Haewŏl taught that "No respected doctor refuses patients. As for the study of the Sagely Way, there is no such thing as rejection of simple-minded people."[74] This broad-minded sentiment closely parallels the educational vision of Confucius, who taught that "in education there should be no class distinctions"[75] and who claimed "never [to have] denied instruction to anyone who, of his own accord, has given me so much as a bundle of dried meat as a present."[76] In his own learning, Haewŏl demonstrated a similarly egalitarian ethic, seeking edification from whatever source was available: "Who is not a teacher to me? As for me, even though it may be the words of a woman or child, I can learn from them and take them as the words of my teacher."[77]

As for gender relations, it should be noted that Tonghak ethics, while retaining some of the language of Confucian patriarchy, were nevertheless quite amenable to extending the scope of acceptable activities for women. For example, Haewŏl taught that "Wives are the rulers of the house. They are invariably involved in the veneration of Heaven, the offering of sacrifices, the entertainment of guests, the making of food and clothing, the raising of children, and the weaving of hemp cloth."[78] Although Haewŏl retains the basic framework of the traditional Confucian distinction between separate male and female spheres of activity, he makes the noteworthy innovation of including women in the veneration of Heaven and the offering of sacrifices. While female participation in these activities would have been regarded as incompatible with orthodox Confucian notions of propriety, it would not have been considered unusual in the context of Buddhist or Shamanic religious practice. It would appear from this that Tonghak egalitarianism with respect to gender relations was less a product of classical Confucianism than of other religious influences. Yet even within the scope of a gender relations paradigm that is basically Confucian, we find themes that serve to moderate its more patriarchal aspects. For example, in a discourse that begins with the phrase "man is heaven, woman is earth," Haewŏl goes on to emphasize the

[73] See, for example, Susan S. Shin, "Tonghak thought," p.18.

[74] "Taein chŏmmul" [On relating to people and dealing with things], *Ch'ondogyo kyŏngjŏn*, p.138.

[75] *Analects*, 15:38 (D. C. Lau's translation).

[76] *Analects*, 7:7.

[77] "Taein chommul," *Ch'ŏndogyo kyŏngjŏn*, p.137. Haewŏl's statement bears an obvious similarity to a famous saying of Confucius: "When I am in the company of two others, I will certainly find a teacher among them. I single out their strengths to emulate, and their weaknesses to correct." *Analects* 7:22.

[78] "Puhwa pusun" [On conjugal harmony], *Ch'ŏndogyo kyŏngjŏn*, p.140.

critical importance of both men and women and the need for harmony between them.[79] Moreover, rather than preaching female subordination, Haewŏl instructs men to treat their wives with patience and kindness, particularly when they themselves are at fault:

> A woman has a peculiar nature. Even if she gets angry, a husband must do his best and humble himself before her. If he bows once and then again and maintains his composure through gentle and considerate words, then the harmony of heaven and earth will dwell between them even if there has been serious wrongdoing. I implore you to humble yourself in this way.[80]

When one considers the aforementioned importance Suun placed on the instruction of women and children in his doctrine, the surprisingly egalitarian tendencies within Tonghak thought come into even clearer focus. Although it would be unwise to deny that there were limits to this vision imposed by the realities of time and place, it would be equally erroneous to dismiss the significance of egalitarian themes in Tonghak thought on account of the persistence of certain patriarchal or authoritarian tendencies. Set against the prevailing attitudes, values, and practices perpetuated by the Chosŏn intellectual tradition, the egalitarian quality of Tonghak thought in general and its social ethics in particular is undeniable.

[79] Ibid. Here Haewŏl substitutes the characters *kon* 乾 [heaven] and *kŏn* 坤 [earth] from the *Yi jing* 易經. The effect is to imply a closer, more complementary relationship than would the more conventional *ch'ŏn* 天 [heaven] and *chi* 地 [earth].

[80] Ibid., p.141.

Conclusion

Some might wonder whether the egalitarian social vision of Tonghak thought followed directly from exposure to Western ideas or from changing nineteenth-century social reality, or whether it is possible that Suun (and, indirectly, Haewŏl) drew solely upon his classical education and merely refined or extended in an egalitarian direction the ideas of populistic Confucian intellectuals.[81] Contrary to the common assumption that the conservative (read: "inegalitarian") aspects of Tonghak thought can be ascribed to Confucian influences, I have suggested that the Sino-Korean intellectual tradition, and particularly the tradition of Mencian populism, offered the raw materials from which an egalitarian social ethic could be constructed. This possibility has been ignored in most of the secondary literature on Tonghak.

While the connection between self-cultivation and one's relationship to Heaven alluded to in the *Mencius* and the *Doctrine of the Mean* does not, by itself, amount to an egalitarian system, it nevertheless provides the essential underpinnings for such a system once the identity between Heaven and humankind has been more clearly established. As we have seen, this critical step was proposed by Suun more than two millennia later. This linkage was a radical development in Chosŏn thought. In what was for Chosŏn intellectuals the orthodox formulation of Confucian philosophy, Zhu Xi had earlier introduced the idea of a metaphysical principle joining Heaven and human

[81] Suun was educated by his father, a dedicated Neo-Confucian scholar. In his "Mongjung mundapka" [Song of a dream dialogue], Suun claims to have begun his training at age six and to have mastered "10,000 classical texts" by the time he completed his studies. *Ch'ŏndogyokyŏngjŏn*, p.85. Allowing for some rhetorical embellishment, it seems clear that Suun was very well educated in the Confucian tradition.

nature. Yet in a significant departure from this view, though not from classical Confucian ideas, Tonghak thought rejects the proposition that Heaven and human nature must be united by an impersonal principle. Instead, Suun posits an unmediated identity between Heaven and humankind. Therefore, one could argue that he effectively circumvents Zhu Xi by referring back to an earlier, predominantly Mencian, paradigm for understanding Heaven and human nature.

Nevertheless, neither Mencius nor Suun consciously examines the ethical implications of this linkage. Only Haewŏl addresses this important topic through his ethical mandate *sain yŏch'ŏn*. As we have seen above, *sain yŏch'ŏn* represents Tonghak ethics in their most innovative and compelling form. We have also seen that Tonghak ethical norms placed a high priority on taking care of the disempowered and the needy. Not surprisingly, this vision of social justice is also deeply rooted in classical Confucian sources.

In advancing the argument that the Confucian tradition contained much that was useful to the early Tonghak project of constructing an egalitarian social order, I remain mindful of the emphasis given by other scholars to the persistence of so-called 'conservative' tendencies in Tonghak thought. It is clear that certain elements so identified can indeed be attributed to the prevailing influence of mainstream Confucian ethics. Some scholars have argued that what the Tonghak movement really sought was the restoration of traditional Korean values, and that it was thus essentially conservative rather than revolutionary.[82] Yet even where this argument is made with cogent subtlety, 'tradition' seems to refer to something that is invariably reactionary, hierarchical, and fundamentally incompatible with egalitarianism. We have seen, however, that the tradition of Confucian, and particularly Mencian, populism contains important elements fully compatible with an egalitarian ethic. What is more, Tonghak represented the first Korean religious or philosophical system to construct an ontological framework within which an egalitarian ethic could be articulated.

It is true that early Tonghak thought advocated social change through metaphysical, as opposed to revolutionary political, means. It has thus been pointed out that Tonghak thought was evolutionary in that the social change it envisioned was to occur first and foremost in the "minds and spirits of individuals who exercised, in form and action, a deep faith in the physical and spiritual regenerative powers" originating in the Tonghak understanding of Heaven and humanity.[83] Meanwhile, Tonghak emphasized loyalty to the monarch in addition to careful observance of duties and obligations arising from other traditional Confucian relationships. In view of this fact, I would concede that it is appropriate to emphasize the importance of Confucian elements in Tonghak thought. Yet one should not ignore the distinct possibility that the very system that informed the conservative ethos of Chosŏn society could at the same time be an essential source of Tonghak egalitarianism.

[82] See, for example, Susan S. Shin, "Tonghak thought," pp.15–16, 18–19; see also Young Ick Lew, "The conservative character of the 1894 Tonghak peasant uprising: a reappraisal with emphasis on Chŏn Pong-jun's background and motivation," *Journal of Korean Studies* 7 (1990–91): 153–4.

[83] Weems, *Heavenly way*, p.13.

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