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Revolutionary Movements in Korea

1. The Donghag Movement, A.D. 1860–95

A new Korean religion was founded in A.D. 1860 by Choe Je-u (Choe Su-un, 1824–1864). It was called “*Donghag*” or “Eastern Learning” in contrast to Seohag or “Western Learning”, which meant Catholicism. The government labeled Donghag as irreligious in 1863, three years after the cult had started. Choe Je-u was arrested in 1864 and executed on suspicion of disturbing the world and charming the people. He was apparently influenced by Catholicism, but he misunderstood Christianity.

“China has fallen – he wrote –, and soon our time will come. Why are the foreigners so powerful? It is because of their religion. That doctrine is called ‘Suhak’, Western Learning, and their purpose in life is about God . . . Western Religion is like a mere rigmarole of prayer sentence, and it has no power. Their purpose is similar to mine, but they do not have truth . . . They pray for selfish benefits. They have no proper spirit to inspire them in their physical life, and there is no teaching concerning the true God in their system. They have an appearance of it, but no reality. They do not have our sacred formula . . . “– The sacred formula referred to reads as follows: “I pray that it may generally pour down, so that Infinite Energy be abiding in me. Serve the Heavenly Lord, and the nature will be done, the mind be established. Don’t forget all things forever and ever.”

The three holy virtues of the Donghag teaching implied:

1. The believer has the inner Spirituality. 2. The believer has the outer formulation of the Force, i.e., Humanity. 3. Everybody in the world will know the Permanent Unmovable One.

These three holy virtues correspond to Saenggagnam of nothingness, Saenggagham of somethingness and Saenggagdoem of everythingness according to the Old Korean myth of the god Hananim. Thus the origin, the structure and the form of Humanity are found in the virtues mentioned. This means that Donghag has completed the formulation of Humanity in its own way, including the origin, the structure and the form of Humanity. Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism were reformulated in this Eastern learning under Roman-Catholic influence. Anyway the belief in Hananim was preserved in the Donghag teaching.

Choe Je-u had two girl slaves. He let one of them marry his son, and adopted the other as his daughter. At that time it was forbidden for a nobleman to marry a slave, so Choe acted against the law and tradition. On a private level, his Humanism was therefore revolutionary, though presumably influenced by Roman-Catholic faith, since Catholics used to meet in their churches without distinction of age, sex and class.

In 1894 a national revolution was conducted by the Donghagist general Jeon Bong Jun, who revolted against the government to help poor farmers and oppressed Donghagists. In the preceding years the excess of imports, foreign influence on home policy and the corruption of the government had destroyed the economic life of the people. The rulers oppressed the farmers and exploited the poor. In 1894 the farmers of Gobu County impeached the district officer before the provincial governor, but without success. On this occasion General Jeon Bong Jun and the Donghagists revolted against the government. His slogans were “Je Pog Gu Min” or “Removal of Tyranny for the Salvation of the People”, and “Je Se An Min” or “Redemption of the World for the Peace of the

People". In a few months he occupied almost half of the southern part of the peninsula. The government troops lacked in discipline and were not prepared to meet the revolters. Chinese troops were asked to suppress the revolts, and Japan also wanted to send troops. But as the government feared Japanese intervention, it tried to reconcile the revolters and promised Jeon Bong Jun to accept his reform plans. Though not satisfied with the promise, he was afraid of the Chinese troops and withdraw from the cities occupied. As the Japanese nevertheless sent troops against the Chinese on the plea of protecting Japanese residents, Jeon Bong Jun occupied the cities again. The revolters marched to Gongju, where they were destroyed by the Korean and Japanese troops. Jeon was arrested and executed. The war continued between the Chinese and Japanese forces and ended with Japanese victory in 1895.

The reform plans of the Donghagists could not be realized, but they illustrate what the present author would like to call the Humanism of the Donghag movement. It included twelve items: 1. The government and the people should cooperate in the whole business of administration. 2. Corrupt officials should be punished. 3. Tyrannical noblemen should be punished. 4. The unreasonable Confucianists should be punished. 5. Slave documents should be burnt. 6. Slaves should be dealt with as men. 7. Widows should be allowed to marry again. 8. Taxes should be reduced. 9. Officials should be appointed without regard to regionalism. 10. The pro-Japanese group should be punished. 11. Loans should be exempted. 12. Land reforms should be carried through.

The Donghagists established a sort of reform offices in the occupied area, but had no chance of carrying out the reform plans. However, the Donghag movement was the largest popular movement of the nineteenth century, and the people of Korea participated in it without distinction of age, sex and class.

2. The Samil Movement of A.D. 1919

A pro-Japanese cabinet headed by Gim Hong Jib attempted to realize a reform policy in 1894, patterned after that of Japan. Its policy was met with a nation-wide revolution by Euibyeong, the Righteous Army, which consisted of conservative Confucian scholars and great parts of the people. This happened especially after the assassination of Queen Min, instigated by the Japanese minister in October 1895. Owing to this incident the Japanese lost their prestige as well as their political influence in Korea. As the government troops were engaged in repressing the revolution, the Russian minister Weber in Seoul brought one hundred soldiers to the harbour of Incheon and let them invade the capital in A.D. 1896. The king Gojong and pro-Russian ministers were protected by the Russian sailors. Gojong stayed in the Russian legation for one year, and the Russians were able to control everything, while the Japanese lost their influence for the moment.

Ironically enough the king was enthroned as emperor in 1897 when Korea was being impaired by the Japanese as well as the Russians. In 1904 the Japanese started a war against the Russian empire by sinking a Russian battleship near Incheon. The war ended with Japanese victory in 1905. In the same year Korea became a Japanese protectorate and lost east Manchuria in 1909. The puppet empire continued to exist but in reality it became a Japanese colony. When king Gojong retired in 1907, the last king of the Yi dynasty (1392–1910) Sunjong (or Yunghi Emperor) became his successor but the empire was annexed to Japan in 1910.

The years before and during the World War I were characterized by the so-called Land Survey Project which began immediately after the Japanese annexation of 1910 and ended in 1918. As a result of the project most farmers lost their land, which was given under control of Japanese landowners. One year after the project had been completed, the “*Samil*” Movement broke out. It was connected with the victory of the Entente. Woodrow Wilson, the 28th president of the United States of America (1913–1921), declared the ideal of his world policy to be the “Self-Determination of Every Nation” (1919). Koreans abroad were impressed by Wilson’s statement. Some of the Koreans in Shanghai sent Gim Guy Sig to the Peace Conference in Paris, while others in the USA and Russia attempted to organize a political movement. Korean students in Tokyo gathered in the Korean Y.M.C.A. building in February 1919. About 600 students led by Choe Pal Yong decided to send a message to the Japanese Council and this was the direct motive of the Samil (the First of March) Movement. Its leaders expected Wilson to help them, but America could not do anything.

On March 1, 1919, two days before the funeral ceremony of king Gojong, 16 Protestants, 15 Donghagists and 2 Buddhists proclaimed the independence of Korea in the Pagoda Park of Seoul where the citizens and the students gathered together, and similar demonstrations were arranged in 211 of the 218 counties. More than 2 millions took part in ca. 1500 meetings all over the country. Japanese policemen are said to have killed about 7000, wounded twice as many, and arrested approximately 50 000 persons, and some 500 churches and houses were destroyed or burnt. After the failure of the Samil Movement, Korea was economically dominated by Japan. A Korean exile-government was organized in Shanghai by Syngman Rhee and others. More than 2 million Koreans lived in Manchuria and there was a Korean military academy as well as more than ten military strongholds in this country. In 1920 Korean forces in Manchuria defeated the Japanese troops, but after Japan had made Manchuria a second colony, the Korean troops were destroyed. Most of them fled to China in order to form allied forces with the Chinese and the provisional government of Shanghai also had its own troops which helped the Chinese against the Japanese aggression.

However, the Samil Movement was in fact a non-violent movement. It was represented by the leaders of the dominant confessions except the Catholics. Although the Confucians were not active at first, they participated later. The nation-wide demonstrations of the Samil Movement were characterized by a consciousness of the approaching end of the world, and the idea of “a new age and a new world” is found in the Declaration of Independence. Christian and Korean eschatology were combined in the future-orientated consciousness of the demonstrators. The movement represented the first interreligious activity found in Korea. Buddhist leaders officially cooperated with the Christians, and Confucians at least helped the Christians. All had the same consciousness of an end of this world.

3. The Christian Revival movement during the 20th century

It is remarkable that a *Christian revival* movement inspired by the American methodist R. A. Hardie arose shortly before and after the annexation of Korea by Japan in 1910. It was led by the missionaries at first, but fulfilled by Koreans. The general expectation of the approaching end of the world and the emphasis on the repentance of sins helped the movement to be effective among the people.

Hardie had been sent to Korea in 1890 by the Canadian College Mission, and later served the Northern Methodist Mission. Emphasizing the confession of sins, he started his revival movement in 1903 with a meeting for Bible study and prayer at Weonsan. The movement was rapidly made known throughout the country. A second impulse came from a prayer meeting of ten missionaries and five Korean preachers who gathered on a mountain near the city of Gaesong in 1909. This led to many successful revival meetings, and a project called "A Million Souls for Christ" was adopted by the General Council of Evangelical Missions in Seoul. Although one did not win a million souls, the result was a successful interdenominational movement. The activity was forwarded by great revival meetings led by the Koreans Gim Ig Du around 1920 and Yi Young Do around 1930. During and after the Korean war of the years 1950–1953 this revival movement dominated the minds of Christians and non-Christians. They found themselves in a time when the end of the world appeared to be near.

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