『한국민족문화』 61, 2016. 11, 123~150 http://dx.doi.org/10.15299/jk.2016.11.61.123

Prioritizing Ki : The Shift Toward Energy and Transformation That Emerged in the 19th Century Korea

Don Baker*

1. Before New Religions: Neo-Confucianism
2. Tasan Chŏng Yagyong
3. Ch'oe Han'gi
4. Ch'oe Cheu and Tonghak
5. Kim Ilbu and the *Correct Changes*
6. Kang Chŭngsan and Kaepyŏk
7. Pak Chungbin and Won Buddhism
8. Conclusion

<Abstract>

In the early 19th century we can see the beginning of a significant shift in Korean thought away from the Neo-Confucian emphasis on the eternal principles behind immutable patterns (*li*) toward *ki*, matter-energy that animates change in the universe. That change is most apparent in the emergence of Korea's first indigenous organised religion, Tonghak. In Tonghak thought, *li* disappears. OneWe sees more signs of this shift away from *li* toward *ki* in other new religions as well, including the Chŭngsan family of religions as well as Won Buddhism. What is the philosophical background for this change in Korean thinking? What are its implications for Korean understanding of the present and expectations of the future? This examination of the writings of both philosophers and religious thinkers in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century reveals that change and progress, rather than immutable

* The University of British Columbia

principles, have come to the fore in the philosophical and religious consciousness of Koreans.

* Key Words: Ki, Ch'oe Han'gi, Tonghak, Chŭngsan, Sot'aesan

157 years ago, in 1860, the first of Korea's new religions was born. A man named Ch'oe Cheu (1824-64) had an encounter with God and began preaching to his fellow Koreans what he learned in that encounter. That was the beginning of the religion which came to be known in the 19th century as Tonghak ("Eastern Learning"). Its primary offshoot today is called Ch'ŏndogyo ("the religion of the heavenly way"). Tonghak was just the first of many indigenous new religions that have appeared on the Korean peninsula since the mid-19th century. Among those new Korean religious movements which emerged after Tonghak did are Daesoon Jinrihoe and Won Buddhism, both of which were influenced by Tonghak though they have developed in very different ways and bear little resemblance to Tonghak. When scholars write about these Korean new religious movements, they tend to focus on two aspects. First of all, they identify the focus of their particular spiritual gaze, whether it is Hanullim for Ch'ŏndogyo, Sangjenim for Daesoon Jinrihoe, or the Ilwonsang for Won Buddhism. Each of these new religions represents a sharp break with the polytheism that characterised traditional Korean religiosity. However, they differ in how to replace that polytheism. Scholars studying Korea's new religion often operate under the assumption that it is the unique focus of their spiritual gaze that is the core of the distinctive identity of each of those new religions, and therefore it is important to pay close attention to how they each define the objects of their respective spiritual gaze.

Another common approach to the study of Korea's new religions is to highlight the notion of Kaepyŏk, the idea that the cosmos is about to

undergo a dramatic physical transformation that will create a paradise on this earth. The expectation of Kaepyŏk, a "Great Transformation," is often seen as a distinguishing characteristic of Korea's new religions that marks those new religions off from Korea's traditional religions of Buddhism, shamanism and, if it can be labeled a religion, Confucianism. Seldom do scholars look behind the unique doctrinal features of Korea's new religions, their theology and their eschatology, to examine the religious and philosophical currents that gave rise to distinctive beliefs. Instead, scholars often assert that there are political grounds for the emergence of new religions in Korea. New religious movements, it is often said, represent the desire of the suffering masses to free themselves from the political, economic, and social oppression they were subjected to for centuries. Supposedly such oppression became much worse in the 19th century, exacerbated by growing corruption in government, and that is why new religions began emerging in the second half of the 19th century.[1)]

There is a problem with this explanation. The Chosŏn dynasty Korea ruled Korea from 1392 to 1910. There is no clear documentary evidence that corruption was any worse in the 19th century than it was in the four centuries that preceded it. Nor is there much evidence, except in the case of another new religion, called Taejonggyo, which emerged just as Korea was falling under Japanese colonial rule at the beginning of the 20th century, that those religious movements began as expressions of political discontent. Rather, they appear on the scene primarily as religious movements. As such they are manifestations of some significant changes in the Korean worldview that became apparent in the 19th century. They represent a shift in the way some Koreans conceived of ultimate reality,

1) For a particularly sophisticated example of a political explanation for the emergence of new religions, see the survey of the history of new religions in Korea by the sociologist Kil-myung Ro, "New Religions and Social Change in Modern Korean History," *The Review of Korean Studies* 5, 1 (2002): 31-62.

and therefore a shift in the steps they believed human beings needed to take in order to live in accord with ultimate reality and, as a result, live happier and healthier lives. In order to understand why Korea produced the new religious movements it did in the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, it is helpful to begin by looking at changes in Korea's philosophical outlook. There is one philosophical change that is particularly relevant to the emergence of Tonghak, Daesoon Jinrihoe, and Won Buddhism. That is the shift in what Koreans thought was the source of value and goodness in the world, and a resulting shift in how they envisioned the role of change in the creation and maintenance of value and goodness.

1. Before New Religions: Neo-Confucianism

The dominant worldview during the Chosŏn dynasty, the assumptions and values promoted by the government and espoused by the male members of the ruling elite, is what Westerners call "Neo-Confucianism." It has the prefix "neo" because about 800 years ago some scholars in China added a metaphysical foundation to the Confucian ethics that had constituted the mainstream of Chinese moral philosophy for more than a thousand years before that. That result was a comprehensive philosophy that Koreans, rather than labeling it "Neo-Confucianism," referred to as "*sŏngnihak*" [the study of human nature and principles]. The syllable "*ni*" in "*sŏngnihak*" in most phonetic environments is usually pronounced "li." *Li* refers to the universal network of principles that define and direct appropriate interactions not only within the human community but within the material world as well. A better translation than principles would be "patterns," since *li* originally meant the patterns in a raw piece of jade a sculptor had to work with in order to transform that piece of jade into a work of art. In the Neo-Confucian vision of reality, there is no personal

creator, no God, externally imposing order on the cosmos. Instead, *li*, which was conceived of as unconscious yet orderly interactive processes, was believed to work with *ki* (Chinese *qi*) to create and regulate both the natural and the human world so that entities within both the natural and the human realms interacted the way they were supposed to interact. *Li* both defined and directed the cosmic harmony that was seen by Neo-Confucians as the very definition of the good.

Ki traditionally was seen to play a different role. *Ki* is difficult to define in English. One American scholar of traditional Chinese thought wrote that *ki* is "often translated as life breath, energy, pneuma, vital essence, material force, primordial substance, and psychophysical stuff."[2] Another translation that is somewhat unwieldy though accurate is "configurative energy."[3] However it is defined, to understand how the Korean worldview changed in the 19th century, particularly the attitude toward *ki*, it is important to keep in mind that traditionally *ki* was essentially nothing more than the basic stuff that *li* used to shape the material entities whose mass and interactions constitute the universe, and was also the animating force that made it possible for those things to move and therefore interact. However, *ki* itself did not determine what things should do. That role was assigned to *li* alone. *Ki* might even hinder things from acting properly, since it coalesced into separate and distinct material entities, and the very definition of proper action was action in harmony with something else. In other words, *ki* makes thing that are apart from each other while *li* made things a part of an all-encompassing and unifying network of appropriate interactions. That which united was moral. That which separated was seen as either morally neutral or even as morally dangerous. *Li* was good. *Ki* was not.

---

2) Richard J. Smith, *The I Ching: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 51.

3) Wonsuk Chang, "Ch'oe Han-Gi's Confucian Philosophy of Experience: New Names for Old Ways of Thinking," *Philosophy East and West* 62, 2 (Apr., 2012): 186-196.

Neo-Confucianism, in addition to its fundamental moral ontology of *li* and *ki*, was also based on a world view that recognises that change was real (that is one feature of Neo-Confucianism that makes it radically different form Buddhism) but, nonetheless, valued the non-changing principles of appropriate interaction (*li*) much more than it valued change and things which change (*ki*). *Li*, as the never-changing patterns defining what good is and what is good, was seen as something human beings should strive to align with, though that usually meant they had to struggle against *ki*. One of the first indication that Koreans were beginning to pay more attention to *ki*, though it was still viewed in a negative light, is a growing tendency from the latter half of the 17th century to blame negative trends in Korea's international environment, such as the rise of the "barbarian" Manchu to power in China, on *ki*. Neo-Confucians had previously tended to assume that bad things happen because people acted in less than moral ways and that misbehavior introduced disharmony into the universe. However, scholars have noticed a growing tendency among Koreans in the 18th and 19th centuries to adopt a more fatalistic approach and blame a deterioration in the quality of *ki* (literally, a decline in *kisu*, "the numerical strength of *ki*) for a deterioration in their personal situation or the situation of their kingdom.[4)]

Within this *li*-dominant world view, there were variations of course. After all, in one of the *Four Books* all good Confucians knew by heart, the Chinese sage Mencius (372-289 B.C.E.) had bragged that he was good at cultivating his "flood-like *ki*" and that gave him the strength he needed to act in appropriate harmony with people and things around him.[5)] And the influential 16th-century Korean Neo-Confucian philosopher Yulgok Yi I (1536-84) had argued that it was *ki*, rather than *li*, that was responsible for

4) Kwon Soo Park, "Flourishing Yin and the Decline of the Universe: Qishu Theory and Cosmological Interpretation on the Rise of 'Barbarian Power' in the late Joseon Period," *Review of Korean Studies* 13, 1 (Mar., 2010): 37-57.

5) *Mencius*, IIA, 2: 12-16.

the movements of the mind and body that made possible all human emotions and decisions, whether they were good or bad. However, it was still whether *ki* moved in conformity with or contrary to *li* that determined whether an emotion or action was moral or immoral. Even though we can see an increasing emphasis on *ki* and its potential for good among Koreans over the next three centuries who thought of themselves as disciples of Yulgok, nevertheless they still assumed that it was whether *ki* worked with rather than against *li* that determined whether *ki* in a particular situation was moral supportive *ki* or *ki* that hindered ethical behavior.

2. Tasan Chŏng Yagyong

Growing attention to *ki*, even among those scholars who looked for philosophical guidance to T'oegye Yi Hwang (1501-70) and his insistence on a clear distinction between *li* as that which defined morality and *ki* as that which could make moral action difficult, led to a change in the way some Korean Neo-Confucians conceived of the relationship between *li* and *ki*. In the 19th century, the prioritising of *li* began to unravel as it began to lose its central role in ethical and spiritual discourse. The first signs of that unraveling appear in the writings of the brilliant Confucian philosopher Chŏng Yagyong (1762-1836), better known by his pen name of Tasan. He was an unusually creative Confucian thinker, pushing the boundaries of his Neo-Confucian tradition about as far as he could while still remaining with the broad parameters of Confucianism. That creativity may have been the result of his youthful encounter with Catholicism, which first appeared in Korea in the 1780s,[6)]

6) Yong-bae Song, "On the Family Resemblance of Philosophical Paradigm: Beween Dasan's Thought and Matteo Ricci's Tianzhu shiyi," in Anselm Min, ed. *Korean Religions in Relations: Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity* (Albany, NY: State

or it may have been the result of the broad reading he did during the 18 years he spent in exile because of that youthful involvement with Catholicism. Under such an environment, Tasan challenged many of the core tenets of Neo-Confucianism, including the priority it gave to *li*. Tasan broke with centuries of Neo-Confucian tradition when he denied not just priority but even an independent status to *li*. Borrowing terminology he could only have learned from Jesuit publications imported into Korea from China, Tasan wrote that *li* is always attached to something else and cannot stand alone. *Ki*, on the other hand, according to Tasan, "exists in and of itself." That means that, to use Western medieval philosophical terminology, *li* is an attribute and *ki* is a substance. Both ontologically and, Tasan argued, in practice, *ki* is prior to *li*.

> *Ki* is something that exists on its own, and *li* can only be found in connection with something else. Anything so dependent is contingent on that which exists on its own. This means the *li* of a thing can only function after some *ki* has congealed into that thing. This being the case, it can be said that *ki* first appears and then *li* tags along. It cannot be said that *li* appears and then *ki* follows. Why do I say that? There is no way *Li* can operate by itself. Before something becomes active, although there may already be a principle defining the way it should look and the way it should act, for that principle to be actualised *ki* must already be there, ready to be directed by *li*…. Every grass and tree grows and thrives. Every bird flies and every beast runs. Such functioning is nothing other than *ki* forming into special entities and *li* tagging along.[7]

Tasan made this distinction between *ki* as independent and *li* as

---

University of New York Press, 2016), 119-151.

7) Yagyong Chŏng, "Chungyong kangŭibo,"[Lectures on the Meaning of the Zhongyong, Augmented] *Yŏyudang chŏnsŏ* [The Complete Works of Yŏyudang Chŏng Yagyong] II: 4: 65a-b.

dependent a key component of his solution to a problem of moral philosophy that had been debated by Korean Neo-Confucians since the late 16th century. Koreans argued over whether *li* in the mind generated the innate moral instincts Neo-Confucians believed were an integral part of human nature, or whether all instincts and emotions were generated by *ki*, our physical makeup, and the only difference between moral and immoral instincts and emotions was rather they were controlled by *li* or not.[8] Tasan argued that it might be more useful for cultivating a moral character to think of *li* as generating one's moral instincts so that one can focus on attention on allowing *li* to operate without it being hindered in any way by one's *ki*, but, in actuality, it is *ki* that acts, and *li* is nothing without *ki* to act through. Then Tasan went even further and denied the assumption that *ki*, because its individualising effect hinders the harmonising cooperation that is the very definition of morality, is the sole source of all evil in the world. He said that, if that were the case, since every person is formed from *ki* that is different from everyone else's *ki*, that would mean that it is the *ki* that constitutes people's bodies that alone determines where they are a sage or a rogue. Those who were lucky enough to be born with clear *ki* would become sages. That who were unlucky enough to be born with murky *ki* would never live moral lives or become wise no matter how hard they tried.[9] But such an assumption would eliminate all personal responsibility for their moral character.

For Tasan, who also adopted the idea of free will from the Catholic books he read in his 20s, that was unacceptable since it would mean that the majority of us should not even bother trying to act appropriately and become exemplary individuals: "If goodness and the lack therefore is determined solely by differences in psychophysical endowments, the

8) Philip J. Ivanhoe, "The Historical Significance and Contemporary Relevance of the Four-Seven Debate," *Philosophy East and West* 65, 2 (Apr., 2015): 401-429

9) Chŏng Yagyong Chŏng,, "Maengja yoŭi" [The essential points in the Mencius], *Yŏyudang* chŏnsŏ II: 5: 34a-35b.

natural goodness of Yao and Shun should not earn our admiration, and the natural badness of Kings Jie and Zhou should not be anything for us to worry about. Everything would be determined by the luck of the draw in receiving our psychophysical endowment at birth."[10] Tasan does not go as far as the founders of Korea's new religions who followed him several decades later did in awarding *ki* positive moral qualities but he does push *ki* into neutral territory, making it easier for those who followed him to move even farther away from the Neo-Confucian assumption that *ki* is at best morally dangerous and at worse the actual cause of evil.

Tasan may have pushed *li* aside from a central role in his moral philosophy because he felt it was too abstract of a concept to serve as a powerful enough incentive to stimulate the effort necessary to act appropriately consistently. He noted that men would be inspired to be careful of even their most private thoughts only when they believed that an actual supernatural personality was watching them from above at all times. *Li*, as a philosophical concept without the power of thought or emotion, could not inspire the feeling of caution and apprehensive human beings needed to motivate them to overcome their innate tendency to pursue personal benefit at the expense of the common good.[11]

For three centuries the metaphysical concept of *li* had been at the core of Korean Confucian philosophical discourse. Debates over the respective roles of *li* and *ki* in the generation of human instincts and emotion and in the differences between human beings and animals had gone on so long that they may have exhausted the potential, at least in some 19th century Korean minds, for *li* to continue to play a creative role in formulating a practical moral philosophy. Tasan, at least, appears to think so.

---

10) Ibid., "Nonŏ kogŭmju," in [Annotations old and new on the Analects] *Yŏyudang chŏnsŏ* II: 15, 12b.

11) Yagyong Chŏng,Chŏng Yagyong, "Chungyong chajam," [Admonitions for myself upon reading the Zhongyong] *Yŏyudang chŏnsŏ* [The Complete Works of Yŏyudang Chŏng Yagyong], II: 3, 5a.

3. Ch'oe Han'gi

In the middle of the 19th century, another Korean philosopher joined Tasan in that drive to dethrone *li* and give *ki* more authority, more power, and more respect. Ch'oe Han'gi (1803-1875) probably never read any of Tasan's writings. After all, Tasan was considered a criminal because of his connection with the emergence of an illegal Catholic community in Korea, so his writings were not widely circulated until the 20th century. Nevertheless, Ch'oe proposes radical changes to the philosophical foundations of Neo-Confucianism, just as Tasan had done. That suggests that, if two men who did not know each other or read each other's works were moving in the same direction, there must have been some new currents swirling through intellectual life in Korea in the 19th century. The same currents may also have stimulated the birth of Korea's first new religions.

Before discussing those early new religions, however, it would be useful to focus on philosophy a while longer and examine Ch'oe Han'gi's "philosophy of *ki*."[12] Ch'oe still used the word *li* but he used it in a sense quite different the way his predecessors had used it. Like Tasan, Ch'oe may have been looking for a less abstract and more concrete tool with which to deal with the problems of everyday life. However, Ch'oe differed from Tasan in that he came to be less concerned with problems of cultivating a moral character than he was with how to understand the material world in which he was immersed.

In Ch'oe's essays, *li* loses much of its normative force. *Li* are still the principles defining what things are and what things do (the standard Neo-Confucian definition) but Ch'oe adds that *li* are not some abstract eternal rules imposed on *ki* but instead are inferences created by human

12) Han'gi Ch'oe, *Kihak* (Kiology), translated by Son Pyŏnguk (Seoul: Yŏgang Press, 1992)

beings in their own minds (which he says are *ki*) in order to understand the world they are interacting with.[13] If those principles are accurate, human beings can use them to interact appropriately with their surroundings. But they can also misunderstand things and situations they encounter. In such cases, the patterns they infer in their mind from those interactions can lead them to act inappropriately. In that case, those inferences would be false *li*.

This is a radical departure from traditional Neo-Confucianism in which *li* by its very definition referred to accurate guidelines for interactions. For Ch'oe Han'gi, *li* is subjective, rather than objective, and therefore can be either correct or incorrect. Moreover, since *li* are the product of human cognition, they do not have any separate metaphysical existence. They depend completely on human minds, and, since those minds are composed of *ki*, that means they depend on *ki*, just as Tasan argued.[14] When Ch'oe first started writing about *li* and *ki*, he distinguished between *li* which operated within objects and processes independently of cognition and *li* which were created by human beings inside their heads when they tried to understand how the world around them operated. He called those external *li* the *li* which are the patterns of the movements of *ki* in nature.[15] In other words, even those objective *li* were still subordinated to *ki*. This is how he thought when he first started writing his philosophical essays in the 1830s. When he published his *Kiology* (kihak) in 1857, he went even farther. He dropped talk of objective *li* and made all *li* totally dependent

13) Ibid., Ch'oe Hangi, "Ch'oe Hangi: Experences, Inferences, and Understanding," in Peter H. Lee (ed), *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 274-277.

14) Short excerpts of Ch'oe Han'gi's writings are available in English. Wonsuk Chang, "A Reformation of Confucianism: Annotated Translation of the Prefaces to the *Penetration of Spirit Configurative Energy* and to the *Records of Correlative Reasoning*," in *Sudia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai Philologia* LVIII: 1 (2013) 103-116.

15) Unsok Pek, "The Empiricist's Progress: Ch'oe Han'gi's Journey away from Confucianism," *Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture* 8 (2008): 235-236.

on *ki* in human heads. Even cognition itself was attributed to *ki*, in the form of "spiritual *ki*." "Spiritual ki" (which may also be translated as ethereal *ki*) does not have any religious connotations. That term does not refer to any spirits or other supernatural entities. Instead, Ch'oe used that term to refer to *ki* which is unlimited in its power to penetrate everything there is. It is the *ki* of the mind and its power of unlimited penetration that gives the mind the ability to understand the world around it.[16)]

4. Ch'oe Cheu and Tonghak

At the same time Ch'oe Han'gi in Seoul was proposing a more *ki*-centered view of the universe, on the other side of the Korean peninsula, over in its southeastern corner, Ch'oe Cheu (1824-1864) was proposing a more *ki*-centered religiosity. (The two Ch'oe's are not related and did not know each other. Ch'oe is a common surname in Korea.) As noted earlier, Tonghak, as the religion he is seen as the founder of was called in the 19th century, began in 1860 when Ch'oe said he had an encounter with God. Koreans had had encounters with gods for millennia. After all, that is what Korean shamans have done for ages.[17)] However, Ch'oe was the first one to say he talked with the one and one Supreme Deity.

Ch'oe was executed by the Chosŏn state in 1864 for sounding too much like a believer in the outlawed religion of Catholicism (which had introduced monotheism to Korea six decades earlier.) However, his teachings did not die with him and survive today primarily as the religion of Ch'ŏndogyo. (There are a number of smaller religions that trace their origins to Ch'oe Cheu's encounter but it is Ch'ŏndogyo that has come to

16) For an entended discussion of Ch'oe Han'gi's philosophy, see Ibid., 231-260.

17) Laurel Kendall, *The Life and Hard Times of a Korean Shaman: Of Tales and The Telling of Tales* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988).

represent his legacy in the minds of most Koreans today.[18]) Even though Ch'oe appears in some of his reports to be talking with an actual supernatural personality, in other places he appears to be speaking metaphorically and to be actually engaged in an internal dialogue.[19] It is that latter feature of his reports that were emphasised by the Tonghak and Ch'ŏndogyo leaders who followed him. Tonghak and Ch'ŏndogyo have come to emphasis "God" as a supernatural force that is both within every human being as well as filling the universe at large. That is well known to scholars who have studied the evolution of Tonghak thought. What few have pointed out, however, is that the "God" of Tonghak and, later, Ch'ŏndogyo is none other than *ki*.

Ch'ŏndogyo today refers to its Divine Force as *Hanullim*, which it glosses as a way of referring to Heaven.[20] When it was still Tonghak, in its scriptures in Classical Chinese rather than in Korean it more often referred to that Divine Force as *Ch'ŏnju* (the Catholic term for God, the Lord of Heaven) and *Sangje* (the Lord Above, a traditional Sinitic term for the most powerful God of all).[21] However, one can see the connection between that Divine Force and *ki* in an incantation found in those Classical Chinese scriptures. Ch'oe Cheu taught that incantation to his disciples, and which is still chanted in Ch'ŏndogyo services today. That incantation, known as the "twenty-one syllable incantation" because it has

---

18) Ch'oe Chong-sŏng, 동학의 테오프락시 : 초기 동학 및 후기 동학의 사상과 의례 *Tonghak ŭi t'eop'ŭraksi: ch'ogi tonghak mit hugi tonghak ŭi sasang kwa ŭirye* [The Theopraxy of Tonghak: Thought and Ritual in early Tonghak and later Tonghak] (Seoul: Minsogwŏn, 2009).

19) For example, compare George L. Kallander, *Salvation through Dissent: Tonghak Heterodoxy and Early Modern Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013), 158 and 159-160.

20) Kim Taegwŏn, ed. *Tonghak Ch'ŏndogyo yongŏ sajŏn* [Dictionary of Tonghak and Ch'ŏndogyo Terminology] (Pusan: Sinji Press, 2000), 369.

21) Park So Jeong, "Philosophizing *Jigi* of Donghak as an Experienced Ultimate Reality," *Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture* 26 (Aug.,ust, 2016), p. 86.

exactly 21 syllables in Korean, can be translated as follows:

> Ultimate Energy being all around me, I pray that I feel that Energy within me here and now. Recognising that God [Ch'ŏnju] is within me, I will be transformed. Constantly aware of that divine presence within, I will become attuned to all that is going on around me.[22)]

In this incantation, God appears as Ultimate Energy, the animating force in the universe which he/she can experience personally when he/she ask Ultimate Energy to fill our hearts with spiritual energy but which he/she should also recognise as present not only in ourselves but also in all other human beings as well as in all other animate objects in the universe. Ch'oe, like Chŏng Yagyong and Ch'oe Han'gi, was clearly searching for a more concrete absolute on which to ground both his spiritual practice and his understanding of the material world. In his case, however, he appears to have felt the need for an absolute he could actually experience, that he could feel within his body and mind. *Li* was too abstract to fill that need. *Ki*, however, could do so.

There is another term that Ch'oe Cheu mentions only a few times but which became much more important later, both in Tonghak/ Ch'ŏndogyo and in some other new religions that arose in the early 20th century. That term is *Kaepyŏk*, which can be translated as "creation," "the great transformation," or "the great opening." It can refer to the original transformations of *ki* that gave birth to our world 50,000 years ago.[23)] But it can also refer to a coming transformation of the realm of *ki* that will turn this world into a paradise.[24)] Here one sees a combination of the

---

22) That incantation can be found in *Ch'ŏndogyo Kyŏngjŏn* [The Scriptures of Ch'ŏndogyo] (Seoul: Ch'ŏndogyo Headquarters, 1994), 70. An English translation of Ch'oe's explanation of that incantation is available in Kallander, 161.

23) *Ch'ŏndogyo Kyŏngjŏn*, 171; *Tonghak Ch'ŏndogyo yongŏ sajŏn*, 15.

24) Pak Kwangsu, *Han'guk sinchonggyo ŭi sasang kwa chonggyo munhwa* [The

traditional notion that *ki* constitutes the material world but degenerates over time with the new, more positive notion that *ki* can be revitalised to create a new world free of the defects of the old world. The perfect world, in this view, is not formed by allowing *li* to operate unhindered despite the barriers *ki* raises to its smooth operation. Instead, it emerges through the natural cyclical operation of *ki* itself. Natural change, rather than unchanging principles, can produce a better world.

5. Kim Ilbu and the *Correct Changes*

That notion is made more explicit in the writings of a man named Kim Hang (1826-1888), also known as Kim Ilbu. Kim looked at the *Book of Changes*, an ancient Chinese divination guide that identified sixty-four primary patterns of change in the cosmos, and decided that it not only provided advice on trends in specific circumstances individuals encountered as they went about their everyday lives (the traditional way that work was viewed) but also told them how the universe was going to change overall. He calculated, based on extrapolations from the directions of the movements those primary patterns suggested, that the old cosmic order was coming to an end and instead a new world was coming to replace it. In that new world, Korea, rather than China, would be the central kingdom. Moreover, nature itself would improve, since the earth would shift from its tilted axis so that it would stand straight up. That would ensure that there would be no more need for leap years, since every year would last exactly 360 days, and each month would last exactly 30 days. Moreover, there would be no more hot summers and cold winters. Instead, the weather would always be moderate, like Korea enjoys in the

---

Philosophies and Religious Cultures of Korea's New Religions] (Seoul: Chimmundang, 2012), 226-233.

spring and in the fall.[25]

What is important to note is that Kim Ilbu is predicting a major improvement in life for human beings on earth because of a major transformation brought about by *ki*. The *Book of Changes* identifies the fundamental patterns of change as yin and yang, understood by Neo-Confucians as the "Two *Ki*," which through their interactions generated everything in the material universe. Though mainstream Neo-Confucians argued that the transformations of *ki* were informed by *li*, that is not what Kim Ilbu says. When he does mention *li*, he has it function as no more than the patterns of specific changes *ki* undergoes. The greater transformation, the one that gives birth to a new and improved universe, is generated by the internal nature of *ki* itself. *Ki*, not *li*, is primary.[26] He has made explicit the importance of *ki* in cosmic change, and the resulting arrival of a better world, that Ch'oe Cheu had implied.

6. Kang Chŭngsan and Kaepyŏk

The next significant development in the shift from prioritising *li* to prioritising *ki* comes early in the next century. We find it in the recorded works of Kang Ilsun (1871-1909), better known as Kang Chŭngsan (Jeungsan is another spelling). It is Kang Chŭngsan who is seen as the founder of Daesoon Jinrihoe, the largest of many religious organizations

25) For more on Kim Ilbu's new interpretation of the *Book of Changes* (Yijing), see his *Chŏngyŏk* (sometimes transliterated as Jeong Yeok), translated by Sung Jang Chung, *The Book of Right Change, Jeong Yeok* (Bloomington, Ind.: iUniverse, 2010). Also Jung Young Lee, "The Chongyok or Book of Correct Change: Its Background and Formation," in Eui-young Yu and Earl H. Philips, ed. *Traditional Thoughts and Practices in Korea* (Los Angeles: Center for Korean-American and Korean Studies, California State University, Los Angeles, 1983), 31-50.

26) Kim Ilbu Kim, *The Book of Right Change, Jeong Yeok,* 31-33.

that worship Kang Chŭngsan. To members of any of the Chŭngsan family of religious groups, Kang is Sangjenim "The Honorable Lord on High," the supreme deity. What is important to note today, however, is the role Kang Chŭngsan played in the shift to a *ki*-centered outlook in modern Korea. He did two things that are important for that process. First of all, he provided a deeper reason why Kaepyŏk was coming, going beyond Kim Ilbu's explanation it would simply be the product of natural changes in the cosmic order. Secondly, he offered what he said was a way to hasten that change so that human beings could live in a better world sooner rather than later.[27] Kang explained that the world we live in has been a world of conflict rather than cooperation, a world filled with resentment and anger rather than love and satisfaction. He described that current social order as one of *sanggŭk*, literally "mutually conquering" or "mutual competition." The accumulation of resentment over the centuries by those who have been unfairly treated or lost out in that competition is wreaking havoc in the current cosmic order. That makes it urgent that this world be quickly replaced by a new world, one in which conflict will be replaced by mutual aid, injustice by justice, and resentment by contentment. He labels this coming age one of "*sangsaeng*," literally "mutual life-giving" or "mutual cooperation."[28]

Kang argues that *Sangsaeng*, understood as "mutual aid and cooperation," will apply not only to human beings and spirits but also to all elements in the universe. Using terminology drawn from the traditional Confucian philosophy of nature, Kang promised that the older *sanggŭk* order in the cosmos, traditionally expressed metaphorically as water dousing fire and metal chopping wood, for example, will be replaced by the more productive *sangsaeng* order in which water produces wood

27) Joon-sik Choi, *The Development of "Three-Religions-are-One Principles from China to Korea* (P'aju, ROK: Jimoondang, 2009), pp. 158-164.

28) Yi Kyŏngwŏn Yi, *Taesun Chillihoe kyorinon* [*The Ddoctrines of Daesoon Jinrihoe*] (Seoul: Munsach'ŏl, 2013), pp. 141-176.

(vegetation), just as metal produces water (in the form of condensation), and wood produces fire.[29] *Sangsaeng* is not a new concept for Koreans. However, it traditionally was paired alongside s*anggŭk* to provide a comprehensive picture of interaction among all the material elements in the cosmos. According to the traditional picture, the five core phases in nature are wood (slow growth), fire (rapid growth), earth (stability), metal (slow decline), and water (rapid decline). This is the order of production (*sangsaeng*), with wood fueling fires, fires creating earth (ashes), earth producing metal (which can be dug out of the earth), and metal producing water, which in turn produces wood. At the same time there is an order of destruction (*sanggŭk*), with wood breaking up earth, earth damning water, water putting out fire, fire melting metal, and metal cutting wood.[30] Notice that in the traditional view, these two orders applied to material objects, not to human society. Moreover, they both occurred over and over again, not in simple linear sequence. And, what is more important for understanding how much Kang transformed the traditional view, these five core phases had referred to interactions within the realm of *ki*. Kang took this traditional view of nature and expanded it to embrace human society as well while at the same time making it sequential rather than simultaneous. Kang also introduced a ritual called the "ritual for the re-construction of heaven and earth" (*Ch'ŏnji kongsa*) that he promised would, if properly performed in accordance with his instructions, hasten *Kaepyŏk*. *Kaepyŏk*, he proclaimed, would replace the current world of constant competition with a world of universal cooperation. It would also transform the material world in the way Kim Ilbu predicted, with an end to the need for leap years and the need to wear heavy clothing in winter

---

29) Ibid., Yi Kyŏngwŏn, *Taesun Chillirohoe sinangnon* [*The Rreligious Bbeliefs of Daesoon Jinrihoe*] (Seoul: Munsach'ŏl, 2012), pp. 180-273.

30) For more on the interactive processes that constituted the core of Sinitic natural philosophy, see Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China. Vol. 2 History of Scientific Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 232-261.

and fight off heat with air-conditioning in the summer.[31)]

7. Pak Chungbin and Won Buddhism

One more Korean new religion which uses the transformed notion of *ki* and also talks about *Kaepyŏk* is Won Buddhism. However, Won Buddhism, which has its origins in the enlightenment of Pak Chungbin (1891-1943) in 1916, has a very different understanding of *Kaepyŏk*. Pak, better known as Sot'aesan, divided *Kaepyŏk* into two stages. He pointed out that *Kaepyŏk* was already taking place in the material world, thanks to dramatic and rapid advances in science and technology.[32)] However, he added that a corresponding Great Transformation in spirituality had not yet begun. He therefore created a new style of Buddhism, one he thought was more in keeping with the modern world, to promote a modern spirituality.[33)] His movement has come to be known as Won Buddhism because the Ilwonsang, the object of the spiritual gaze of Won Buddhists, is a circle, pronounced *won* in Korean. That circle is understood as a visual reminder of the underlying unity and interconnectedness of all things, which Won Buddhists also refer to as the Dharmabody Buddha.

The influence of the shift toward prioritising *ki* in Korean thought is not as obvious in Sot'aesan's thought as it is in the thinking of Ch'oe Cheu

---

31) Pak Kwangsoo, *Han'guk sinchonggyo ŭi sasang kwa chonggyo munhwa,* pp.234-255; Na Kwŏnsu, "Han'guk sinchonggyo ŭi Kaepyŏk sasang-e koch'al: Suun, Chŭngsan, Sot'aesanŭl chungsimŭro" [The Notion of Kaepyŏk in Korea's New Religions: Focusing on Ch'oe Cheu, Kang Chŭngsan, and Pak Chungbin], *Sinchonggyo yŏn'gu* [Studies in New Religions] 24 (April, 2011), 243-275.

32) Wŏnbulgyo chŏnso [The Ccomplete Wworks of Won Buddhism] (Iksan, ROK: Wonbulgyo Publishing, 1999), p.7. The Korean reads "물믈질이 개벽되니정신을 개벽하다나."

33) Don Baker, "Constructing Korea's Won Buddhism as a New Religion: Self-Differentiation and Inter-religious Dialogue," *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 3:1 (2012), 47-70.

and Kang Chŭngsan. Nevertheless, one can still see signs of it. For example, Sot'aesan told his disciples, "When the world arrives at the degenerate age and faces troublesome times, a great sage with a dharma that can preside over an epoch of the world will perforce appear to deliver the world and, *by redirecting the energy of heaven and earth*, will rectify the world and regulate people's minds."[34] Another example of the relative importance of *ki* in Won Buddhism, besides the fact that Sot'aesan does not talk about *li*, is a prayer, or rather an incantation, that the second patriarch of Won Buddhism Chŏngsan (Song Kyu 1900-1962) composed and that Won Buddhists continue to intone today. That prayer is called the "Numinous Incantation" and can be translated as follows:

> The numinous energy [ki] of Heaven and Earth settles my mind,
> All things turn out as I wish, fusing with my mind;
> Heaven and Earth and I are the same one essence,
> I and Heaven and Earth, being the same one mind, are equally authentic.[35]

One more interesting *ki*-related feature of Won Buddhism is the approach to meditation it promotes. Won Buddhism is a Buddhism of everyday life, not a Buddhism for monks isolated in mountain monasteries. A core teaching of Won Buddhism is that daily life and meditation (by which is meant a calm and attentive state of mind) should be inseparable. However, Won Buddhism also recognises that, in order to cultivate such a state of mind, there are times when practitioners need to engage in actual sitting meditation. The explicit guidelines Won Buddhism provides for such quiet moments draw on traditional *ki*-oriented meditation practices. In the Won Buddhist canon, practitioners

34) *The Doctrinal Books of Won-Buddhism* (Iksan, ROK: Department of International Affairs of Won-Buddhist Headquarters, 2016), 449.
35) Ibid., 559.

are advised that, when they practice sitting meditation, they should sit down with their legs crossed and "casually bring down all the body's strength to the elixir field…be aware only of the energy that has settled in the elixir field."[36] The "elixir field," known in Korean as the *tanjŏn*, has traditionally been considered the reservoir of life-sustaining and enhancing *ki* in the human body. During the Chosŏn dynasty, Koreans seeking enhanced longevity often engaged in *tanjŏn* meditation in the hope that they would thereby enhance the quality of the *ki* necessary to sustain their lives and, as a result, would live much longer and even, perhaps, become an immortal.[37] Won Buddhist practitioners, however, engage in *tanjŏn* meditation to cultivate an enlightened state of mind, not because they wish to live forever. They are taught that if they focus their attention on that reservoir of *ki*, they will be able to calm both their body and the mind and, after a while, achieve the mental state that is the goal of such meditative practice. "The state in which only the thought of resting in the Danjeon [tanjŏn] exists is recognised as the state where the distinction between subject and object is forgotten"[38] and the traditional Buddhist goal of apprehending the ultimate unity of all that is, is realised. A focus on *ki*, therefore, becomes the gateway to enlightenment.

8. Conclusion

Obviously, this short survey of three of Korea's new religious movements does not provide a comprehensive account of the beliefs and

36) Ibid., 69.

37) Don Baker, "Cinnabar-Field Meditation in Korea," in Halvor Eifring, ed. 2015: *Meditation and Culture: The Interplay of Practice and Context* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 162-174.

38) Chwasan Kwang-jung Yi, *Commentary on the Method of Sitting Meditation in Chungjeon* (Iksan, ROK: Wonkwang Publishing, 2004), 82.

practices of the three Korean new religions discussed here: Tonghak/ Ch'ŏndogyo, Daesun Jinrihoe, and Won Buddhism. The limited purpose of this article is to point out that most of the previous studies of those religions have overlooked an important common element in not just those religions but in the intellectual culture of Korea in general, starting in the early 19th century with Chŏng Tasan and Ch'oe Han'gi. Korea's new religions did not emerge out of a historical vacuum nor were they merely a manifestation of political discontent. They represent instead one manifestation of a gradual shift from an emphasis on *li*, on the never-changing normative patterns that define and direct appropriate behavior, toward *ki*, the energised matter that constitutes and animates material objects. To ignore that change in attitude toward the role of *ki* in the universe, and in the human community, risks misunderstanding the historical environment that stimulated the rise of those early Korean new religions. Ignoring the rising importance of *ki* in Korean thinking over the last couple of centuries may result in a failure to take into account an important factor in not only why those religions emerged when they did but why they have taken the shape they have taken. To steal a phrase from the mid-19th century Korean philosopher, to understand the religious history of modern history, it is necessary to engage in "kiology," the study not of *ki* per se but of changes in how *ki* has been conceived by Korean over the last couple of centuries.

Bibliography

Baker, Don. “Cinnabar-field meditation in Korea.” In Halvor Eifring, ed. *Meditation and Culture: The Interplay of Practice and Context*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015, 162-174.

_____. “Constructing Korea’s Won Buddhism as a New Religion: Self-Differentiation and Inter-religious Dialogue.” *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 3, 1 (2012): 47-70.

Chang, Wonsuk. “Ch’oe Han-Gi’s Confucian Philosophy of Experience: New Names for Old Ways of Thinking.” *Philosophy East and West* 62, 2 (Apr., 2012): 186-196.

Ch’oe Chong-sŏng. 동학의 테오프락시: 초기 동학 및 후기 동학의 사상과 의례 *Tonghak ŭi t’eop’ŭraksi: ch’ogi tonghak mit hugi tonghak ŭi sasang kwa ŭirye* [The Theopraxy of Tonghak: Thought and Ritual in early Tonghak and later Tonghak]. Seoul: Minsogwŏn, 2009.

Ch’oe Han’gi. *Kihak* (Kiology), translated by Son Pyŏnguk. Seoul: Yŏgang Press, 1992.

Choi, Joon-sik Choi, *The Development of “Three-Religions-are-One Principles from China to Korea.* (P’aju, ROK: Jimoondang, 2009.)

Ch’ŏndogyo Kyŏngjŏn [The Scriptures of Ch’ŏndogyo]. Seoul: Ch’ŏndogyo Headquarters, 1994.

Chŏng Yagyong. *Yŏyudang chŏnsŏ* [The Complete works of Yŏyudang Chŏng Yagyong]

Chwasan Yi Kwang-jung, *Commentary on the Method of Sitting Meditation in Chungjeon*. Iksan, ROK: Wonkwang Publishing, 2004.

Chwasan Yi Kwang-jung, *Commentary on the Method of Sitting Meditation in Chungjeon* (Iksan, ROK: Wonkwang Publishing, 2004)*The Doctrinal Books of Won-Buddhism*. Iksan, ROK:

Department of International Affairs of Won-Buddhist Headquarters, 2016.

Ivanhoe, Philip J. "The Historical Significance and Contemporary Relevance of the Four-Seven Debate." *Philosophy East and West* 65, 2 (Apr., 2015): 401-429.

Kallander, George L. *Salvation through Dissent: Tonghak Heterodoxy and Early Modern Korea*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013.

Kendall, Laurel. *The Life and Hard Times of a Korean Shaman: Of Tales and The Telling of Tales.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988.

Kim Ilbu. *Chŏngyŏk,* translated by Sung Jang Chung, *The Book of Right Change, Jeong Yeok.* Bloomington, Ind.: iUniverse, 2010.

Kim Taegwŏn, ed. *Tonghak Ch'ŏndogyo yongŏ sajŏn* [Dictionary of Tonghak and Ch'ŏndogyo Terminology]. Pusan: Sinji Press, 2000.

Lee, Jung Young. "The Chongyok or Book of Correct Change: Its Background and Formation." In Eui-young Yu and Earl H. Philips, ed. *Traditional Thoughts and Practices in Korea.* Los Angeles: Center for Korean-American and Korean Studies, California State University, Los Angeles, 1983, 31-50.

Lee, Peter H (ed.) *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

Na Kwŏnsu. "Han'guk sinchonggyo ŭi Kaepyŏk sasang-e koch'al: Suun, Chŭngsan, Sot'aesanŭl chungsimŭro" [The Notion of Kaepyŏk in Korea's New Religions: Focusing on Ch'oe Cheu, Kang Chŭngsan, and Pak Chungbin], *Sinchonggyo yŏn'gu* [Studies in New Religions] 24 (Apr., 2011), 243-275.

Needham, Joseph. *Science and Civilization in China. Vol. 2 History of Scientific Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956.

Pak Kwangsu. *Han'guk sinchonggyo ŭi sasang kwa chonggyo munhwa* [The Philosophies and Religious Cultures of Korea's New Religions]. Seoul: Chimmundang, 2012.

Park Kwon Soo. "Flourishing Yin and the Decline of the Universe: Qishu Theory and Cosmological Interpretation on the Rise of 'Barbarian Power' in the late Joseon Period." *Review of Korean Studies* 13, 1 (Mar., 2010): 37-57.

Park So Jeong, "Philosophizing *Jigi* of Donghak as an Experienced Ultimate Reality.," *Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture* 26 (Aug.,ust, 2016):, 81-99.

Pek, Unsok. "The Empiricist's Progress: Ch'oe Han'gi's Journey Away from Confucianism." *Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture* 8 (2008): 231-260

Ro Kil-myung. "New Religions and Social Change in Modern Korean History." *The Review of Korean Studies* 5, 1 (2002): 31-62.

Smith, Richard J. *The I Ching: A Biography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.

Song, Yong-bae. "On the Family Resemblance of Philosophical Paradigm: Beween Dasan's Thought and Matteo Ricci's Tianzhu shiyi." In Anselm Min, ed. *Korean Religions in Relations: Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2016, 119-151.

Wŏnbulgyo chŏnso [*The Complete works of Won Buddhism*] (Iksan, ROK: Wonbulgyo Publishing, 1999.),

Yi Kyŏngwŏn, *Taesun Chillihoe kyorinon* [*The Ddoctrines of Daesoon*

Jinrihoe]. (Seoul: Munsach'ŏl, 2013.)

_____, Yi Kyŏngwŏn, *Taesun Chillirohoe sinangnon* [*The Rreligious Bbeliefs of Daesoon Jinrihoe*]. (Seoul: Munsach'ŏl, 2012.)

<국문초록>

기(氣)의 우선순위 결정
: 19세기 한국에서 나타난 에너지와 변화를 향한 이행

돈 베이커(Don Baker)

우리는 19세기 초 한국 사유에서 중요한 이행의 시작을 보게 되는데, 바로 불변의 양식인 이(理) 이면에 있는 영원한 원리를 강조하는 신유학에서 벗어나 우주의 변화에 생기를 불어넣는 물체 에너지인 기(氣)로의 이행이다. 이 변화는 한국 최초의 토착 종교인 동학의 출현에서 가장 두드러지게 나타난다. 동학에서 이(理)가 사라진다. 이(理)에서 기(氣)로의 이행 징조는 증산계 종교와 원불교를 포함하여 다른 종교에서도 나타난다. 이런 한국의 사유 변화의 철학적 배경은 무엇인가? 현재의 한국에 대한 이해 및 미래의 한국에 대한 기대에 이것이 함의하는 바가 무엇인가? 19세기와 20세기 초의 철학자와 종교 사상가의 저술에 대한 본 연구는 한국인의 철학적 및 종교적 의식에 불변의 원칙보다는 변화와 진보가 표면화되었다는 것을 보여준다.

주요어: 기(氣), 최한기(崔漢綺), 동학(東學), 증산(甑山), 소태산(少太山)

・논문투고일: 2016년 9월 26일 **・심사완료일**: 2016년 11월 1일 **・게재결정일**: 2016년 11월 25일