

**Prioritizing Ki:  
The Shift Toward Energy and Transformation in 19th century Korea.**

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156 years ago, in 1860, the first of Korea's new religions was born. A man named Ch'oe Cheu had an encounter with God and began preaching to his fellow Koreans what he learned from 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'öndogyo ("the religion of the heavenly way).

Tonghak was just the first of many indigenous new religions that have appeared on the Korean peninsula since then. Among the more important new religious movements in Korea is Daesoon Jinrihoe, which established the university at which we are meeting today. Another new religious movement is Won Buddhism, whose headquarters down in the southwest we will visit on the tour that follows this conference. Probably the best known of Korean new religions overseas is the Unification Church, also known as the Family Federation for Peace and Unification. We will visit their headquarters as well.

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'öndogyo, Sangjenim for Daesoon Jinrihoe, the Ilwonsang for Won Buddhism, or non-Trinitarian God for the Unification Church. All of the new religions represent a sharp break with the polytheism that characterized 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 Kaepyök, the idea that the world is about to undergo a dramatic physical transformation that will create a paradise on this earth. The Unification Church doesn't talk about Kaepyök (that may be because it emerged over half a century later than those other new religions) but the other three new religions I mentioned do talk about it, so the expectation of Kaepyök, a Great Transformation, is often seen as a distinguishing characteristic of new religions that marks new

religions off from Korea's traditional religions of Buddhism, shamanism and, if you want to call it 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 them. Instead, they often assert that there are political grounds for the emergence of new religions in Korea. New religious movements, we are told, 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.<sup>1</sup>

I am a historian of Chosŏn dynasty Korea. That is the dynasty that ruled Korea from 1392 to 1910. I don't see any documentary evidence that corruption was any worse in the 19th century than it was in the centuries that preceded it. Nor do I see 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, I see them primarily as religious movements. As such they are manifestations of some significant changes in the Korean worldview that become apparent in the 19th century. They represent a shift in the way Koreans conceived of ultimate reality, 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.

I am aware that this is a conference on new religious movements. However, I believe that, 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, we need to look at changes in Korea's philosophical outlook first. Today I want to direct your attention to 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.

### 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 we Westerners call "Neo-Confucianism." It gets the prefix "neo" because about 800 years ago some scholars in

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

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 calling it “Neo-Confucianism,” called “*sŏngnihak*,” which means “the study of human nature and principles.”

The syllable “*nǐ*” in “*sŏngnihak*” 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 interactive processes, was believed to work with *ki* (Chinese *qi*) to create and regulate both the natural and the human world.

*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.”<sup>2</sup> Another translation that is somewhat unwieldy though accurate is “configurative energy.”<sup>3</sup> However we define it, what is important for our purposes today is to note that traditionally *ki* was essentially nothing more than the basic stuff that *li* used to shape the things that interact, and was also the animating force that made it possible for 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 things 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.

This is also a world view that recognizes change as real (that is one feature of Neo-Confucianism that makes it radically different from Buddhism) but values the non-changing principles of appropriate interaction (*li*) much more than it values change and things which change (*ki*). *Li*, as the never-changing principles 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*.

#### Tasan Chŏng Yagyong

This prioritizing of *li* began to unravel in the 19th century. We see the first signs of that unraveling in the writings of the brilliant Confucian philosopher Chŏng Yagyong (1762-1836),

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

<sup>3</sup> Wonsuk Chang, “Ch’oe Han-Gi’s Confucian Philosophy of Experience: New Names for Old Ways of Thinking” *Philosophy East and West* 62: 2 (April 2012), pp. 186-196.

better known by his pen name of Tasan. Tasan was an unusually creative Confucian thinker, pushing the boundaries of his Neo-Confucian tradition about as far as he could while still remaining within 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, 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. Whatever the reason, 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, if we 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*.

Here is how Tasan distinguished between *li* and *ki*.

*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 actualized *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. This is none other than *ki* forming into special entities and *li* tagging along.<sup>4</sup>

Tasan made this distinction between *ki* as independent and *li* as 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. Tasan argued that it might be useful in practice to think of *li* as generating our moral instincts so that we can focus on attention on allowing *li* to operate without it being hindered in any way by our *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 that *ki*, because its individualizing effect hinders the harmonizing 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

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<sup>4</sup>. Chŏng Yagyong, “Chungyong kangŭibo,” [lectures on the meaning of the Zhongyong, augmented] *Yŏyudang chŏnsŏ* [The Complete works of Yŏyudang Chŏng Yagyong] II: 4: 65a-b.

from everyone else's *ki*, that would mean that it is the *ki* that constitutes our bodies that alone determines where we 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. But such an assumption would eliminate all personal responsibility for our 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 shouldn't 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 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."<sup>5</sup>

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.

#### 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 to me 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 we get to those early new religions, however, I want to focus on philosophy a while longer and introduce you to Ch'oe Han'gi's "philosophy of *ki*."<sup>6</sup> Ch'oe still used the word *li* but he used it in a sense quite different the way his predecessors had used it. 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 in our own minds (which he says is *ki*) in order to understand the world we are interacting with. If those principles are accurate, we can use them to interact appropriately with our surroundings. But we can also misunderstand

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<sup>5</sup>. Chŏng Yagyong, "Nonŏ kogŭmju" [Annotations old and new on the Analects] *Yŏyudang chŏnsŏ* II: 15, 12b.

<sup>6</sup>. Ch'oe Han'gi, *Kihak* (Kiology), translated by Son Pyŏnguk, (Seoul: Yŏgang Press, 1992)

things and situations we encounter. In such cases, the patterns we infer in our mind from those interactions can lead us to act inappropriately. In that case, they 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 don't have any separate metaphysical existence. They depend completely on us, and, since we are composed of *ki*, that means they depend on *ki*, just as Tasan argued.<sup>7</sup>

When Ch'oe first started writing about *li* and *ki*, he distinguished between *li* that operated within objects and processes independently of cognition and *li* that were created by us inside our heads when we tried to understand how the world around us operated. He called those external *li* "the *li* which are the patterns of the movements of *ki* in nature." 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 on *ki* in our heads. Even cognition itself was attributed to *ki*, in the form of "spiritual *ki*." "Spiritual *ki*" (which I prefer to translate as ethereal *ki*) doesn't have any religious connotations. That term doesn't refer to any spirits or other supernatural entities. Instead, Ch'oe uses 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.<sup>8</sup>

#### Ch'oe Cheu and Tonghak

At the same time Ch'oe Han'gi 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. There are a lot of Ch'oes in Korea.) 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 shamans do. 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, it did not die with him and survives today primarily as the religion of Ch'ŏndogyo. (There are a number of smaller religions that trace their origins to Ch'oe Cheu's

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<sup>7</sup>. There are short excerpts of Ch'oe Han'gi's writings available in English. See Peter H. Lee, editor, *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 274-77; Chang Wonsuk, "A Reformation of Confucianism: Annotated Translation of the prefaces to the *Penetration of Spirit Configurative Energy* and to the *Records of Correlative Reasoning*," *Sudia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Philologia* LVIII: 1 (2013) pp. 103-116.

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

encounter but it is Ch'öndogyo that has come to represent his legacy in the minds of most Koreans today.<sup>9</sup>) 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.<sup>10</sup> It is that latter feature of his reports that were emphasized by the Tonghak and Ch'öndogyo leaders who followed him. Tonghak and Ch'öndogyo have come to emphasize “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'öndogyo is none other than *ki*.

Ch'öndogyo today refers to its Divine Force as *Hanullim*, which it glosses as a way of referring to Heaven.<sup>11</sup> When it was still Tonghak, that Divine Force was more commonly referred to as *Ch'önju* (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). However, we can see the connection between that Divine Force and *ki* in an incantation which Ch'oe Cheu taught his disciples, and which is still chanted in Ch'öndogyo services today.

That incantation, known as the “twenty-one syllable incantation” because it has 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. Recognizing that God [Ch'önju] 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."<sup>12</sup>

In this incantation, God appears as Ultimate Energy, the animating force in the universe which we can experience personally when we ask Ultimate Energy to fill our hearts with spiritual energy but which we should also recognize as present not only in ourselves but also in all other human beings as well as in all other animate objects in the universe.

There is another term that Ch'oe Cheu mentions only a few times but which became much more important later, both in Tonghak/Ch'öndogyo and in some other new religions that arose in the

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<sup>9</sup>. Ch'oe Chong-söng, *동학 의 테오프라키 : 초기 동학 및 후기 동학 의 사상 과 의례 Tonghak üi t'eop'üraksi: ch'ogi tonghak mit hugi tonghak üi sasang kwa üiryë* [The Theopraxy of Tonghak: thought and ritual in early Tonghak and later Tonghak] (Seoul: Minsogwön, 2009).

<sup>10</sup>. For example, compare George L. Kallander, *Salvation through Dissent: Tonghak Heterodoxy and Early Modern Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013), p.158 and p. 159-160.

<sup>11</sup>. Kim Taegwön, ed. *Tonghak Ch'öndogyo yongö sajön* [dictionary of Tonghak and Ch'öndogyo terminology] (Pusan: Sinji Press, 2000), p. 369.

<sup>12</sup>. That incantation can be found in *Ch'öndogyo Kyöngjön* [The scriptures of Ch'öndogyo] (Seoul: Ch'öndogyo Headquarters, 1994), p. 70. An English translation of Ch'oe's explanation of that incantation is available in Kallander, p.161.

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.<sup>13</sup> But it can also refer to a coming transformation of the realm of *ki* that will turn this world into a paradise.<sup>14</sup> Here we see a combination of the traditional notion that *ki* constitutes the material world but degenerates over time with the new more positive notion that *ki* can be revitalized 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.

### Kim Ilbu and the *Correct Changes*

That notion is made clearer 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 64 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 but also told us how the universe was going to change overall. He decided 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 spring and in the fall.<sup>15</sup>

What is important for us to note today 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

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<sup>13</sup>. *Ch'ŏndogyo Kyŏngjŏn*, p. 171; *Tonghak Ch'ŏndogyo yongŏ sajŏn*, p. 15.

<sup>14</sup>. Pak Kwangsu, *Han'guk sinchonggyo ūi sasang kwa chonggyo munhwa* [The philosophies and religious cultures of Korea's new religions] (Seoul: Chimmundang, 2012), pp. 226-233.

<sup>15</sup>. 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), pp. 31-50.



one that gives birth to a new and improved universe, is generated by the internal nature of *ki* itself. *Ki*, not *li*, is primary. 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.

### Kang Chŭngsan and Kaepyŏk

The next significant development in the shift from prioritizing *li* to prioritizing *ki* comes from 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 religious organization that founded and runs Daejin University, where we are meeting today. They worship Kang as Sangjenim “The Honorable Lord on High,” the supreme deity. What is important for my argument today 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.

Chŭngsan 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.”

Chŭngsan 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 Sinitic philosophy of nature, Chŭngsan promised that the older *sanggŭk* order in the cosmos, traditionally expressed as water dousing fire and metal chopping wood, for example, will be replaced by the more productive *sangsaeng* order in which water produces wood (vegetation), just as metal produces water (in the form of condensation), and wood produces fire. *Sangsaeng* is not a new concept for Koreans. However, it traditionally was paired alongside *sanggŭk* 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.<sup>16</sup> 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 our purposes, these five core phases refer to interactions in the realm of *ki*. Chŭngsan 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.

Chŭngsan also introduced a ritual called the “ritual for the re-construction of heaven and earth” (*Ch’ŏnji kongsa*) that he said, if properly performed in accordance with his instructions, would hasten *Kaepyŏk*. *Kaepyŏk*, he promised would replace our 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 and fight off heat with air-conditioning in the summer.<sup>17</sup>

### Pak Chungbin and Won Buddhism

That last new religion I want to discuss today also talked about *Kaepyŏk*. 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* in two. He pointed out that *Kaepyŏk* was already taking place in the material world, thanks to dramatic and rapid advances in science and technology. However, he said 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.<sup>18</sup> His movement has come to be known as Won Buddhism for reasons those who go on the tour after this conference will see when we visit the headquarters of Won Buddhism. (The object of the spiritual gaze of Won Buddhists is a circle, *won* in Korean.)

The influence of the shift toward prioritizing *ki* in Korean thought is not as obvious in Sot’aesan’s thought as it is in the thinking of Ch’oe Cheu and Kang Chŭngsan. Nevertheless, we 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

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<sup>16</sup> 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), pp. 232-261.

<sup>17</sup> Pak Kwangsu, 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), pp. 243-275.

<sup>18</sup> 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), pp. 47-70.

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."<sup>19</sup> (emphasis mine)

Another example of the relative importance of *ki* in Won Buddhism, besides the fact that Sot'aesan doesn't talk about *li*, is a prayer, or rather an incantation, that the second patriarch of Won Buddhism Chōngsan (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.<sup>20</sup>

### Conclusion

Obviously, this short survey of three of Korea's new religious movements does not provide a comprehensive account of the beliefs and practices of the three Korean new religions discussed here: Tonghak/Ch'ōndogyo, Daesun Jinrihoe, and Won Buddhism. That would require one book or more for each of those religions. All I have tried to do today is argue 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 Chōng 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 energized matter that constitutes and animates material objects. If we ignore that change in attitude toward the role of *ki* in the universe, and in the human community, we will misunderstand the historical environment that stimulated the rise of those early Korean new religions and, therefore, will fail to comprehend 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, we have 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.

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<sup>19</sup>. *The Doctrinal Books of Won-Buddhism* (Iksan, ROK: Department of International Affairs of Won-Buddhist Headquarters, 2016), p. 449.

<sup>20</sup>. *The Doctrinal Books of Won-Buddhism*, p. 559.

