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Family Resemblances of Religious Reappropriation in Modern Korean Indigenous New Religions

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Abstract

Modern Korean indigenous new religions were originally peripheral faiths—Buddhism, Seondo (immortal Daoist practice), Daoism, folk belief, shamanism, etc.—that had been fragmented and pushed to the margins in a traditional Confucian society. They emerged amid the external threat of Western imperialism and the internal contradictions of late Joseon Confucian society, at a time when the Confucian tradition of yangban aristocratic men dominated the social hierarchy as the official religion. This article examines the family resemblances of modern Korean indigenous new religions through four key aspects: (1) the modern transformation of the concept of the divine—a dynamic revitalization of transcendent reality and an enhancement of direct communication with it; (2) the faith-oriented transformation of religious practice—as Confucian self-cultivation centered on sincerity (seong 誠) *and reverence* (gyeong 敬) *was inherited and then reappropriated into the practice of "sincerity, reverence, and faith"* (seong-gyeong-sin 誠敬信)*, emphasizing "faith"* (sin 信)*; (3) the divergence of practice into meditative disciplines versus magical-ritual practices; and (4) the presentation and implementation of an alternative religious ideal of "Later Heaven Gaebyeok" as a utopian vision aimed at overthrowing the oppression of the ruling class and replacing the existing order.*

Keywords: modern Korean indigenous new religions, family resemblance, post-subaltern, Later Heaven Gaebyeok

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Introduction

All religions are influenced to some degree by prior religious traditions and creatively reappropriate those influences to produce new configurations. Modern Korean indigenous new religions all drew on existing Eastern traditions—Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, shamanism—as well as on Catholicism newly introduced from the West, reappropriating various elements according to their particular interests. As a result, some of these new religions resemble each other in their concept of *cheongwan* (Heaven) or *singwan* (God), others share similarities in views of spiritual practice or rituals, and still others are alike in terms of their social ideals. These religions formed a kind of *religious family*, with overlapping and intersecting similarities analogous to the diverse resemblances among members of a family. This phenomenon of intersecting similarities in religion is comparable to Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of "family resemblance" in his *Philosophical Investigations* (*Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 1953). From this perspective, the family resemblances among modern Korean indigenous new religions can be described not by emphasizing only the unique, insular character of each native religion, nor by attributing everything to one-sided influence from existing Eastern traditions, but rather from the standpoint of dynamic cultural negotiation. In other words, these movements evolved through an active process of exchange and reappropriation of diverse religious resources across Eastern and Western, traditional and modern religions.

Premodern Joseon was a traditional Confucian society in which Confucianism was the normative center of the social order, and other religions—Buddhism, Daoism, Seondo, shamanism—were relegated to the periphery or the lower strata. Within this hierarchical religious order, various socially marginal groups that were politically oppressed formed heterodox communities around mountain temples, with a quasi-ascetic or anti-social character. The new religious movements led by these groups drew upon the cultural resources of traditional popular religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Seondo, shamanism, folk religion), creatively reappropriating them to establish a cluster of peripheral religions at the grassroots. In the process of responding to the shock of Western Christianity entering late Joseon

Korea, modern Korean indigenous new religions displayed several family resemblances in how they reappropriated those religious resources. Therefore, to fully understand the emergence and novel developments of modern Korean religion, one must consider the historical context in which these movements arose as indigenous Eastern alternative religions in confrontation with traditional Confucian hierarchy as well as Western Christian modernity. They reacted to the influx of Western civilization and Christianity by transforming Confucianism, Buddhism, and other premodern traditions in new ways, even as they challenged both the traditional Confucian order and Western Christianity to create new, distinctly Korean religious alternatives.

From such a perspective, this article explores how modern Korean indigenous new religions absorbed the external shock of Christianity and transformed Eastern religious traditions (including Confucianism) through modern reappropriation. This exploration is carried out with a focus on the changes and transformations in their concept of God (*singwan*), their modes of religious practice and ritual, and their religious ideals. In particular, we will analyze, (a) their ultimate reality concepts in connection with "divine religion," or theism (*singyo* 神教); (b) their practice theories and ritual praxis in connection with ancient Heaven-worship rites and Seondo training, and (c) their social vision of Later Heaven Gaebyeok and new social ethics. By examining these aspects, we can trace how diverse Eastern traditions and the stimulus of Western Christianity were dynamically reinterpreted and reappropriated in the formation and development of Korea's modern indigenous new religions.

Theistic Turn: From a Principle-Based Heaven to a Dynamic Supreme Being

Confucian ideology in late Joseon upheld a traditional Korean concept of the divine or Heaven that was close to deism (*isillon* 理神論). Under the stimulus of Catholicism's transcendent, personal monotheism, this traditional Heaven concept—essentially a "forgotten god" (*Deus Otiosus*) in the distant background—began to change into an active, dynamically engaged deity.

Thus, the Neo-Confucian Heaven of Principle (理法的天) that had served as an impersonal model of truth and self-cultivation was, by the time of the emergence of the new religion of Donghak (Eastern Learning), transformed into a personal Supreme Lord (Sangje 上帝) or Lord of Heaven (Cheonju 天主) of religious faith and ritual practice, and who interacts directly with human beings. A transcendent, personal monotheistic concept of God, distinct from the polytheistic tendencies of the East Asian worldview, became prominent. Through Jeungsangyo's concept of the Supreme Lord, the emphasis came to lie on the cosmic and historical activity of a God incarnated as a human; through Daejonggyo's doctrine of the Triune God (*samil singwan* 三一神觀), a nationalistic theology was developed in response to the Christian Trinity; meanwhile, Donghak's dynamic view of a Lord of Heaven (Cheonju) was, after passing through the doctrine of "humans are Heaven" (*innaecheon* 人乃天), re-internalized, and by way of a modern reappropriation of Buddhist ideas it evolved into Won Buddhism's concept of the Dharmakāya Buddha (Beopsinbul 法身佛).

Throughout the Joseon period Neo-Confucianism (*seongnihak*) had enjoyed the status of official religion, maintaining a concept of Heaven close to deism and an integrative, multifaceted view of transcendent reality. For example, an official proclamation of 1802—the "Cheoksa edict" (斥邪綸音)—explicated, following Cheng Yi's commentary on the *Book of Changes* (乾卦), that Heaven (天) in its material aspect, the Supreme Lord (上帝) in its governing aspect, Geon (乾) in its aspect of nature and emotion, and spirits (鬼神) in their functional aspect, together all constitute the impersonal principle of transcendent Heaven's totality. By affirming this impersonal, multifaceted Heaven and denouncing the personal transcendent Lord of Catholicism as an object of faith and ritual, the Confucian establishment criticized the Catholic concept of God (J. Park 1999, 135–136). In the Confucian tradition, performing ritual to Heaven was permitted only for the Emperor (the Son of Heaven), and other rituals were hierarchically restricted: feudal lords could offer rites to certain nature spirits, and commoners were limited to ancestral rites. Thus, ordinary people's access to transcendent Heaven was confined to intellectual inquiry into universal principles and serving as a model for personal virtue.

However, the introduction of Western Catholicism in the late Joseon period made real the possibility that ordinary people could meet and commune directly with the Supreme Lord (Sangje) or Lord of Heaven (Cheonju) through ritual practice. Stimulated by this, the modern new religions began in earnest to open direct ritual engagement with a transcendent Heaven that had previously been the sole prerogative of the monarch. By enabling direct contact with transcendent reality through ritual, these movements achieved an innovation in ritual practice. On the one hand, this led to a greater emphasis on the transcendence of Sangje distinct from all other beings (reflecting the monotheistic influence vis-à-vis East Asian polytheism); on the other hand, the holistic, multifaceted cosmology of the Neo-Confucian Heaven was partially broken apart, as the historical intervention and active agency of the transcendent reality were heightened. In short, dimensions of faith and ritual that had been comparatively weak in the intellectualist Neo-Confucian tradition were dynamically revitalized.

This strengthening of the transcendence of Sangje in late Joseon first took place through a group of Confucian scholars who either accepted or adapted Catholic ideas. For example, Jeong Ha-sang (1795–1839), who converted to Catholicism, wrote in his "Letter to the Prime Minister" (*Sangje sangseo* 上宰相書) that he viewed filial piety to one's father, loyalty to one's monarch, and religious faith in the Lord of Heaven as analogous duties—but ranked faith above loyalty and loyalty above filial piety, thereby establishing a clear hierarchy of values with religious faith at the top. Meanwhile, the Silhak scholar Jeong Yak-yong (or Dasan, 1762–1836), who reinterpreted Catholic teachings—as in his work *On the True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (*Cheonju sirui* 天主實義)—from a Confucian perspective, broke from the Neo-Confucian view of "all things forming one body" (*manmul ilche* 萬物一體), instead clearly articulating a view of "all things sharing one origin" (*manmul ilbon* 萬物一本). In this new view, Jeong emphasized a differentiated hierarchy between the Supreme Lord, humans, and all things, underscoring the transcendent source of all things (the Supreme Lord) and the distinct nature of each being. He thus openly stressed the difference between the Supreme Lord as the transcendent origin of all and the myriad things of the world (J. Park 2008, 92).

The emergence of the idea of a single, transcendent, personal God above humans and all creation stimulated the late Joseon religious milieu—which had a background of popular belief in functional deities and shamanic spirits—to a "monotheistic awakening." Consequently, the Catholic doctrines of the one God, the Incarnation, and the Trinity each served as catalysts in different ways. The appearance of Donghak's Lord of Heaven (Cheonju), breaking from the old Principle-based Heaven, was followed by Jeungsangyo's emphasis on an incarnate transcendent deity, and by the revival of the Three-God (*samsin*) belief connected to ancient founding myths and Heaven-worship rites in Daejonggyo. In each case, the Catholic influence acted as a trigger: it spurred Donghak (and its successor Cheondogyo) to introduce an immanent Lord of Heaven beyond the Neo-Confucian *li*-based Heaven; it inspired Jeungsangyo to highlight the incarnation of the transcendent God; and it catalyzed the resurrection of the ancient faith in the trinity of Heaven-Earth-Humans (*samsin*) in response to the Christian Trinity.

In Confucianism, ancestral rites (*jesa* 祭祀) were emphasized as ritual practices intended to reciprocate the fundamental sources of life. Accordingly, in order to return gratitude to these ultimate sources, the Confucian tradition developed distinct rituals for Heaven and Earth (*cheonji* 天地), ancestral forebears (*seonjo* 先祖), the monarch (*imgeum* 君), and teachers (*seungsa* 師). These were performed respectively in ritual spaces such as the Temple of Heaven (Hwangudan 圜丘壇) and Earth Altar (*jidan* 地壇) in both China and Joseon Korea, or within domestic ancestral shrines (*gamyo* 家廟), as well as at state-level institutions like the Imperial Ancestral Temple (*taimiao* 太廟) in China or the Royal Shrine (*jongmyo* 宗廟) in Joseon. In the *Five Rites of the State* (*gukjo oryeui* 國朝五禮儀), compiled in Joseon Korea under the influence of the *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮), rituals were classified into three categories: *je* 祭 for the heavenly deities (*cheonsin* 天神), *hyang* 享 for human spirits (*ingwi* 人鬼), and *sa* 祀 for terrestrial spirits (*jigi* 地祇). In Xunzi's "Discourse on Rites" (*lilun* 禮論), it is stated that "there are three foundations of *li* 禮," which are identified as Heaven and Earth (*cheonji* 天地) as the source of life, ancestors (*seonjo* 先祖) as the source of lineage, and lord and teacher (*gunsa* 君師) as the basis of politics. In the Joseon dynasty, a tributary state following the Confucian tradition, ritual offerings to Heaven and Earth were omitted—

since only emperors could offer them—while rites to ancestors and lords were maintained. As for *cheonji*, the people were expected to imitate their order through moral cultivation, not through ritual practice.

This distinction laid the foundation for the learning of mind-and-heart (*simhak* 心學) and the theory of self-cultivation (*suyangnon* 修養論), which developed as alternatives to imperial-level rites and became central to Neo-Confucianism (*seongnihak* 性理學) in Joseon. By contrast, the modern new religions innovated ritual practice by making direct ritual access to Heaven (and Earth) possible for everyone. Catholicism delivered a great shock by allowing individuals to worship and pray directly to the Lord of Heaven (God), something not possible in Confucianism. The new Korean religions, linking themselves to the ancient Heaven-worship ceremonies (*jecheon uirye* 祭天儀禮) and the Dangun myth, effectively reconnected to indigenous theistic traditions and revived the divine religion (*singyo*) in a modern form. In short, the theology of the modern Korean indigenous new religions achieved a dynamic revitalization of transcendent reality and greatly strengthened direct communication with the divine.

Donghak's Reappropriation of Heaven-Worship Rituals

In this context, the Eastern Learning (Donghak) movement not only opposed the "Western Learning" of Catholicism but also reappropriated the ancient indigenous tradition of Heaven-worship rites to revive those ritual forms. Donghak's founder Choe Je-u incorporated the old imperial Heaven (*jecheon* 祭) tradition, which had long been banned in Joseon, into his new religion: he performed Heaven-worshipping ceremonies in the mountains (as the court's prohibition of such rites forced them into hidden folk practices). Historically, after the early Joseon dynasty formally outlawed the performance of Heaven rites (祭) by anyone but the Chinese Emperor, remnants of the ancient Heaven-worship rites survived only in remote mountain regions. They persisted as "hidden Heaven rites" performed privately by common folk in ways that blended unorthodox folk beliefs and shamanism (officially considered illicit 'excessive rites,' or *eumsa* 淫祀) (J. Choi 2008). Donghak

inherited these suppressed ritual practices: Choe Je-u retreated into the mountains to conduct Heaven-worshipping ceremonies (*gyeongcheon* 敬天) dedicated to the Heavenly God, and combined these with talismanic seals and incantation exercises in the practice of "serving the Lord of Heaven" (*sicheonju* 侍天主), thereby enabling ordinary people to ritually serve the transcendent Lord of Heaven. During the transmission of leadership to the second Donghak leader, Haewol Choe Si-hyeong, this ritual practice was eventually internalized into the method of "guarding the mind and rectifying *gi*" (*susim jeonggi* 守心正氣) (J. Choi 2009).

Choe Je-u explicitly theorized the method of serving the Lord of Heaven. He stated, "'Serving' (*mosim* 侍) means that inside there is spirit (*sillyeong* 神靈) and outside there is transformation of *gi* (*gihwa* 氣化)." In other words, he explained communion with Heaven in terms of the active agency of spirit and the dynamic operation of vital energy (*gi, qi* in Chinese). This can be interpreted as a reconceptualization of the Neo-Confucian principle (*li* 理) into an immanent transcendence—the universal principle internalized in each individual and manifested through the spontaneous workings of *qi* and mind. This resonates with Toegye Yi Hwang's Neo-Confucian theories that emphasized the proactivity and spontaneity of *li* (such as the doctrines of *li-bal* 理發說 or *li-ja-do* 理自到說), yet Donghak took it further by turning the impersonal *li* into a living, indwelling divine presence. In performing these rites, Donghak creatively merged shamanic, Seondo-Daoist ritual methods with Confucian inner self-cultivation, amounting to a new reappropriation. Choe Je-u himself, in the early phase of his mystical experiences, even wondered whether his experiences were of the Catholic Lord of Heaven, indicating how closely the concept of the Lord of Heaven (Cheonju) in Donghak paralleled the transcendent supreme God of monotheism. Whereas Yi Hwang's Neo-Confucianism, following the dictum that "*li* and *gi* do not mix" (理氣不相雜), did not connect the emergence of *li* with spirit or *gi*, Donghak's practices of *sicheonju* and *susim jeonggi* posited transformative effects linked to spirits and the ultimate *gi* (*jigi* 至氣). In this way, Donghak can be seen as creatively combining elements of shamanism, Seondo/Daoism, and Confucian mind-cultivation into a novel reappropriation of religious practice.

Jeungsangyo's Expansion of Divine Activity

In Jeungsangyo, founded by Kang Il-sun (also known as Kang Jeungsan, 1871–1909), the trend toward a personal, incarnate deity became even more pronounced. Jeungsangyo recognized Kang Jeungsan as the incarnation of a transcendent Supreme Lord (Sangje) and placed great emphasis on faith in this incarnate deity. In this respect, Jeungsangyo differed from Donghak (which did not posit an incarnate god) and was analogous to Catholicism; yet in its method of communicating with Sangje and spirits through mantra incantation, it remained similar to Donghak. This approach had a parallel in China's Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, but Kang Jeungsan went further by declaring himself the Supreme Lord in the flesh, thus extending Donghak's legacy in a new reappropriation. This represented an even more advanced development in that the dynamic agency of the divine was believed to have become incarnate.

Under the authority of a transcendent deity, Kang Jeungsan's Jeungsangyo also embraced and syncretized diverse Eastern and Western religious traditions. Alongside elements of native folk belief and Seondo lineages, it incorporated aspects of the Daoist cosmology of the Ming novel *Fengshen yanyi* (Investiture of the Gods), constructing a celestial realm populated by myriad transcendent spirits. Jeungsangyo envisioned and enacted what Kang called "Heaven and Earth public works" (*cheonji gongsa* 天地公事): an elaborate ritual-drama through which the mutual influence between Heaven's spirits and earthly humans was organically linked. This distinctive reappropriation tied together Heaven and Earth as Kang Jeungsan reordered the cosmos, addressing and resolving cosmic imbalances and human grievances in a millenarian ritual project.

Notably, Jeungsangyo's concept of an incarnate transcendent Supreme Lord should be understood as a proactive reappropriation of Christian stimulus. In Daoism, popular deities typically arise through the apotheosis (*bongsin* 封神) of humans; by contrast, the notion of a transcendent sovereign incarnating in human form is exemplified by the Hindu avatar or the Christian incarnation. Accordingly, Jeungsangyo proclaims itself as an *alternative religion* that unifies (會通) the various Eastern traditions, including Confucianism,

Buddhism, and Daoism, as well as Western Christianity and Donghak, treating them as incomplete preludes and positioning Jeungsangyo as the consummate fulfillment. For example, Kang Il-sun taught that unlike the numerous sages who descend to earth to guide sentient beings, he himself was the incarnation of a qualitatively different, supreme transcendent god, distinct from all other functional deities (Cha 2013, 132f). This unique stance is reflected in Jeungsangyo's cosmology, which divides Heaven into two tiers: within the three realms of the universe, a Dosol Heaven (one of the 33 heavens) is ruled by the Jade Emperor (玉皇上帝), while beyond the three realms lies the Nine Heavens ruled by the Supreme Emperor of the Nine Heavens (九天上帝) (S. Park 2022). In other words, the traditional Heaven was bifurcated into (a) a Heaven of the transcendent supreme God and (b) a Heaven of the functional gods, restructuring the celestial hierarchy. This restructured cosmology—an impersonal Heaven reorganized into a hierarchy with a supreme monotheistic God atop numerous spirits—was essentially a reappropriation of the Eastern conception of the divine in response to Catholic monotheism.

Daejonggyo's Triune God and National Theology

By contrast, the White Peak (*baekbong* 白峯) tradition of Dangun 檀君 worship and the immortal Daoist training (Seondo 仙道) training, as restructured by Na Cheol in the foundation of Daejonggyo 大倧教, is particularly noteworthy as a case of modern reappropriation of ancient Heaven-offering rites (*jecheon uirye* 祭天儀禮). The ritual practices known as the breath control and invocation of Heaven (*pyegi jocheeon* 閉氣朝天) and the immortal rites (*seonuisik* 禮儀式) in Daejonggyo inherited the legacy of *Seondo*'s breath-based training and sacrificial rituals, thereby embodying a hybrid of spiritual cultivation and ceremonial offering. This transformation can be interpreted as a modernized reappropriation of the ancient *jecheon* tradition. According to the *Goryeosa* 高麗史 (History of Goryeo), particularly in the chapter on King Taejo and his "Ten Injunctions" (訓要十條), and to Xu Jing's 徐兢 *Xuanhua fengshi Gaoli tujing* 宣化奉使高麗圖經 (Illustrated Record of the Xuanhua Envoy to Goryeo), the October Eastern Alliance (*dongmaeng* 東盟) rituals—

originally held in Goguryeo—were succeeded in Goryeo by the Festival of the Eight Vows (*palgwanhoe* 八關會). These October full-moon rites included offerings to heavenly deities (*cheonsin* 天神), mountain spirits (*sansin* 山神), and dragon spirits (*yongsin* 龍神), representing Heaven, Earth, and the sea. Notably, the offerings were referred to as vegetarian food, suggesting that unlike traditional sacrificial rites involving animal offerings, these were influenced by Buddhist or Daoist dietary norms, emphasizing simple plant-based rituals. In this light, the *seonuisik* rites of Daejonggyo—although rooted in ancient *jecheon* practices—can be seen not as pure survivals of the past but as transformed forms in which animal sacrifices were replaced by simplified, symbolically vegetarian practices. This aligns with Kim Dong-Hwan's (2021) argument that these rites represent not a direct continuity of ancient tradition but rather its modern reappropriation, reformulated in a Confucianized, Buddhist-Daoist-inflected context. As Lee Wook (2003) has similarly noted, such forms are better understood as ritual transformations adapted to the ethical and symbolic frameworks of the modern age.

Meanwhile, in Daejonggyo, which arose in the late 19th century by drawing on the lineage of Seondo practitioners around Mt. Baekdu, the ancient *siingyo* tradition centered on the Korean foundation myth of Dangun and the *jecheon* (Heaven-worship) rites was revitalized. Daejonggyo creatively reappropriated the Catholic Trinity from a nationalist mythological and Neo-Confucian substance-function (*che-yong* 體用) perspective to construct its unique doctrine of the "Three-One God" (三一神觀). For instance, Daejonggyo theologians and nationalist historians assert the distinctive originality of Daejonggyo's theology by arguing that the transcendent One God (一神), as the fundamental substance (*che* 體), operates phenomenally as Three Gods. This is the essence of the *samil singwan* ('three-one god' view) that Daejonggyo espouses (G. Lee 2012).

As Na Cheol states in the *Great Compendium of Divine Principle* (*Silli daejeon* 神理大全), under the section titled "Divine Positions" (*Sinwi* 神位):

> The divine (*sin* 神)refers to Hwanin 桓因, Hwanung 桓雄, and Hwangeom 桓儉. Hwanin occupies the seat of cosmic creation (*johwa* 造化), Hwanung that of moral edification (*gyohwa* 敎化), and Hwangeom that of governance

> and ordering (*chihwa* 治化). In Heaven, there is none higher; among all things, none precedes them; and among the people, none surpasses them. When divided, they are three; when united, they are one. Thus, the divine position is established through this trinity-in-unity.

The most systematic formulation of Daejonggyo's three-one god theology was presented as the concept of "three-one divine positions" (三一神位) in the *Great Compendium of Divine Principle* (*Silli daejeon* 神理大全) published in 1917 by Na Cheol. In the Goryeo-era chronicle *Samguk yusa* 三國遺事 (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms), the trio of Hwanin, Hwanung, and Hwangeom (Dangun) are described in terms of a familial hierarchy of grandfather, father, and son. Daejonggyo reinterpreted these three figures as representing the three functions of the one transcendent God: creation (*johwa* 造化), moral edification (*gyohwa* 敎化), and governance (*chihwa* 治化). The divine positions of the three gods were aligned with the tripartite cosmic order of Heaven (天), Earth (地, i.e. all material things), and Humanity (人)—the three realms (三才) framework set out in the *Book of Changes*—each being reappropriated as a fundamental reality governing one of these realms. In Daejonggyo's theology, these three modes of the transcendent one God correspond to the Confucian idea of the unity of ruler, teacher, and parent (*gun-sa-bu ilche,* 君師父一體), which was now applied to the divine sphere.

In effect, Daejonggyo's doctrine of three gods in one (三神一體) reflects the substance-function (*che-yong*) paradigm of thought, similar to how the Qing-era "divine Confucianism" (神儒教) had earlier appropriated the Buddhist *ti-yong* 體用 theory. Daejonggyo reappropriated this mode of thought by asserting that one God is the fundamental substance (體), and the three gods are its functions (用). In short, Daejonggyo transformed the indigenous Dangun faith into a triune god belief system, using a framework that blended the Confucian three-talents cosmology and the *gun-sa-bu ilche* concept with the idea of substance and function. Daejonggyo's *samil* theology, therefore, can be seen as a reappropriation of the Dangun myth and faith through a Confucian Heaven-Earth-human (*samjae*) and *che-yong* theoretical structure, undertaken in response to the stimuli of Catholic monotheism and trinitarian doctrine.

Practice of Seong-Gyeong-Sin: Faith-Based Transformation of Confucian Self-Cultivation

The theory of practice (*suhaengnon*) in modern Korean indigenous new religions fundamentally emphasizes *sin* 信 (faith), an innovation that marks a significant reappropriation in their approach to practice. In Joseon-era Confucian tradition, the model of self-cultivation (*suyang* 修養) was centered on sincerity (*seong* 誠) and reverence (*gyeong* 敬). However, in Donghak and the new religions that followed, there is a notable shift in that they place a heightened emphasis on faith (*sinang*) as a core element of religious life. Emphasizing personal faith as central to religious life is a feature more characteristic of Christianity (and to a lesser extent Buddhism) than of Confucianism or other classical Eastern traditions, which focused more on moral cultivation and practice than on faith per se. Therefore, the tendency of the new religions after Donghak to stress faith represents a faith-oriented turn overcoming the purely cultivation-based approach of Confucianism, and can be seen as an adaptive response—at least in part—to the stimulus of Catholicism's focus on belief.

Neo-Confucianism in Joseon, while highlighting the transcendence and primacy of principle (*li* 理) and the organic, comprehensive nature of reality, also placed importance on the study of mind-and-heart (*simhak* 心學),thereby acknowledging a degree of activity and agency in human moral faculties. By contrast, Donghak and subsequent indigenous new religions formulated a path of moral and spiritual cultivation known as "*seong-gyeong-sin*" (誠敬信), literally sincerity–reverence–faith, as the core of their practice. In particular, they integrated the traditional attitudes of sincerity and reverence with the new element of faith in the Sangje (Supreme Lord), seeking an innovative fusion of Confucian self-cultivation with theistic devotion.

In the chapter "On Cultivating Virtue" (修德文) of his *Great Compendium of the Eastern Scripture* (*Donggyeong daejeon* 東經大全), Choe Je-u expounded upon "*seong-gyeong-sin*" as the essential practice of Donghak's moral cultivation, with a special emphasis on faith (信) among the three virtues. Choe argued that through correct faith one attains unshakeable calmness of mind (定), and subsequently, in a naturally arising manner, one adopts an

attitude of reverence (敬) and offers sincere devotion (誠). He encapsulated this in the maxim "first faith, then sincerity" (先信後誠), making faith the foundation upon which true reverence and sincerity are built. In his "Admonition for Meditation" (*jwajam*) in his *Great Compendium of the Eastern Scripture* as well, Choe Je-u summarized the essence of the Great Dao practice (*mugeuk daedo*) as none other than *seong-gyeong-sin*. Furthermore, by thoroughly carrying out the religious faith of *sicheonju* as a ritual incantation practice, he realized the ideals of the utmost sincerity (*chiseong* 致誠) and the offering to Heaven (*jecheon* 祭天)—which correspond to ritual attitudes of sincerity and reverence, respectively—and made it clear that faith in the Lord underpinned those rites. This constituted a new awakening to a modern theistic (*singyo*) turn in practice, centered on faith.

The second leader of Donghak, Choe Si-hyeong (Haewol), reaffirmed these principles, further defining the sincerity as purity and ceaselessness (*jeongseong*), and urging that people never forsake their utmost sincerity, emulating the unceasing sincerity of Heaven and Earth. He also expanded the notion of reverence (敬): in Donghak's teachings, reverence was not only for Heaven, but also for one's own mind, for other people, and for all things. Choe Si-hyeong advocated reverence for Heaven (敬天), reverence for fellow humans (敬人), and reverence for objects (敬物), thus extending the practice of reverence to all levels of existence. This egalitarian and cosmopolitan extension of reverence was part of Donghak's vision of overcoming social hierarchies through spiritual practice (S. Choe 2021).

In Daejonggyo, by contrast, there was a distinctive emphasis on sincerity (誠) and faith (信). Daejonggyo's scripture, *Record of Sincerity and Faith of Various Sages through the Ages* (*Yeokdae jecheol seongsillok* 歷代諸哲誠信錄), chronologically narrates the ancient *singyo* tradition centered on sincerity and belief. Na Cheol, the founder of Daejonggyo, highlighted an important verse from the scripture, "Divine Revelation of the Triune God" ('Samil singo' 三一神誥), which reads: "If you truly adhere to your innate nature and seek its fruition, the Spirit (God) will descend and dwell in your brain." Na interpreted this as encapsulating the essence of faith (信), and taught that the practices of cessation of sensory perception (*jigam* 止感), regulation of breath (*joseok* 調息), and abstention from defilements (*geumchok* 禁觸) as the foundation of

sincerity (*seong* 誠) (Yu 2019, 12–13). Unlike Joseon Confucianism, which was centered on sincerity and reverence, Daejonggyo placed heavier emphasis on belief in the descent of the deity (神) and on exerting utmost sincerity in practice. This represents yet another modern, faith-oriented transformation of the concept of the divine and the cultivation theory: Daejonggyo to some extent continued the Neo-Confucian focus on one's inner nature, but it reappropriated it by stressing faith in the descent of a transcendent god and the sincere devotion accompanying that faith.

Jeungsangyo similarly inherited Donghak's doctrine of *seong-gyeong-sin*, but reappropriated it around faith in the advent of the Supreme Lord (Sangje). Jeungsangyo placed great importance on faith in Sangje's coming (*sangje gangse* 上帝降世) as a core tenet. Even its incantations contain phrases that emphasize sincerity, reverence, and faith: for example, in Jeungsangyo's sacred formulas such as the Heaven and Earth vital fluid mantra (*cheonji jinakju* 天地津液呪), we find expressions like "longevity through sincerity, reverence, faith" (*sumyeong seong-gyeong-sin* 壽命誠敬信), "blessings through sincerity, reverence, faith" (*bokrok seong-gyeong-sin* 福祿誠敬信), and "Heaven and Earth through sincerity, reverence, faith" (*cheonji seong-gyeong-sin* 天地誠敬信). These formulations stress that enjoyment of longevity and good fortune, and the proper order of Heaven and Earth, all depend on one's practice of sincerity, reverence, and faith. Jeungsangyo thus took faith in Sangje as foundational and expanded the sincerity and reverence evident in traditional Heaven-worship rites into a new, comprehensive moral cultivation of *seong-gyeong-sin* that encompassed humans and the cosmos, religion and daily life. In doing so, Jeungsangyo moved beyond the elite-focused cultivation of Neo-Confucian scholars, refocusing practice around the common people's aspirations for longevity and worldly success, and thereby reappropriating the practice in a more popular, this-worldly direction.

Such *seong-gyeong-sin* practice can be seen as going beyond even Dasan Jeong Yak-yong's reinterpretations of Confucian virtue. In his late Confucian thought, Dasan had transformed the Neo-Confucian ontological concepts of sincerity and reverence—through ideas like being conscientious even when alone (*sindok* 愼獨) and being reverent and fearful in the presence of the unseen (*gyesin gonggu* 戒愼恐懼)—into notions emphasizing inner

purity, spontaneity, and autonomy in serving the Lord on High. The new religions, however, went further by subsuming sincerity and reverence under a framework centered on faith. In practice, Kang Jeungsan emphasized cultivating a single-mindedness (*ilsim* 一心), true mind (*jinsim* 眞心), and upright mind (*jeongsim* 正心)—in other words, maintaining a steadfast, genuine, and proper mind, which he taught was the source of blessing (*bok* 福). These qualities correspond directly to the attitude of being sincerely devoted, reverent, and full of faith, which Kang Jeungsan tied to the practice of *seong-gyeong-sin* (J. Choi 2024, 160–167).

Changes in Seong-Gyeong-Sin Practice: Divergence of Meditative vs. Magical–Ritual Paths

Among the modern Korean indigenous new religions, there emerged two divergent orientations in practice. One trend, emphasizing breath discipline and meditation with the aim of becoming an immortal or attaining enlightenment, was most prominent in Daejonggyo and Won Buddhism. Another trend, focusing on magical-ritual practice (*jujum*) of spirit communication (*tongsin*) through talismans, incantations, and occult technique (*sulbeop* 術法) in order to achieve personal well-being and social success, came to the fore in Donghak and the Jeungsangyo movements. This bifurcation in practice reflects the differing priorities of the new religions: some pursued a more inward, ascetic path akin to Daoist meditation, while others embraced a more outward, thaumaturgical path addressing worldly needs.

A noteworthy illustration of this divergence can be seen by comparing certain teachings of Donghak and Jeungsangyo. In Donghak's *Songs of Yongdam* (*Yongdam yusa*), the "Song of Morality" (*Dodeokga* 道德歌) laments a world lacking a heart of reverence, and in the *Donggyeong daejeon*'s "Song of the Beginning of Spring" (*Ipchunsi* 立春詩), Choe Je-u writes: "If the energy of the Dao is preserved for a long time, evil energy cannot invade" (道氣長存邪不入). Kang Jeungsan later shifted the emphasis of this idea, stating: "If one firmly guards with true sincerity, blessings will come first" (眞心堅守福先

來) (Dongdogyo Headquarters 1965, 6:90). In Donghak, "*dogi*" (道氣)—the vital energy of the Dao—was stressed as the key to repelling evil influences and attaining longevity, reflecting a somewhat elitist, ascetic orientation. Kang Jeungsan, by contrast, placed importance on "true mind" (眞心) or "one-mindedness" (一心), focusing on the worldly blessings (*bongnok* 福祿) that sincere practice could bring. Thus, Donghak's approach, with its emphasis on warding off deviant energies and achieving long life, aligned more with an immortality-seeking meditative practice, whereas Jeungsangyo's approach, emphasizing the enjoyment of secular fortune, made its practice more appealing to the masses. Kang Il-sun even described this difference in terms of the "Dao of the Former Heaven" versus the "Dao of the Later Heaven," distinguishing Donghak's more ascetic focus from Jeungsangyo's this-world orientation.

In 1859, as Choe Je-u was concluding fifteen years of religious wandering and searching, he composed his poem, "Song of the Beginning of Spring," which included the lines: "If the energy of the Dao is preserved for long, evil energy cannot intrude, and I will not follow the ways of the masses of this world." This poem—written at the onset of spring—expressed Choe's aspiration and resolve for a hopeful new era after a period of despair. In this poem, the first clause is directly adopted from Chinese Daoism, whereas the second clause reappropriates the Daoist idea into an expression of aspiration for great awakening (*gaebyeok*).

Indeed, the wording of the first clause ('if the energy of the Dao's is preserved for long, evil energy cannot intrude') is a direct quote from two Daoist incantations: the "incantation for purifying the mouth" (*jeonggu sinju* 淨口神咒) and the "incantation for purifying Heaven and Earth" (*jeong cheonji sinju* 淨天地神咒), which are among the Eight Great Divine Incantations of Daoism. These incantations carry the wish to block evil influences and to preserve the Dao's *gi*, thereby repelling misfortune and disease and prolonging life (S. Kim 2004). In Chinese Daoist practice, such spells were recited each morning and evening with incense and scripture chanting as part of daily purification rituals. Historically, these recitations emerged from a fusion of Confucian ancestral rites and Buddhist liturgical chanting, becoming standardized as morning and evening cleansing rituals. They were introduced

to Korea in the late Goryeo period via Daoist lineages, and in the Joseon period they were supplemented and modified, spreading widely among the populace in the form of the *Jade Pivot Scripture* (*Okchugyeong* 玉樞經). The male ritual specialists (*beopsa* 法師) and female shamans (*mudang*) who chanted this Korean *Okchugyeong* also incorporated these incantations, reappropriating them as spells to drive away impure and evil energies and to preserve true vital energy.

Thus, the formative life experiences of the founders of the modern Korean new religions—who often wandered among common folk—can be understood as a process of learning, adapting, and reappropriating such esoteric traditions. The repeated outbreaks of calamities in the late Joseon (famines, natural disasters, epidemics, wars) provided a background against which people eagerly embraced magical-ritual means of deliverance. They adopted practices like invoking powerful deities' names, chanting incantations, using talismans, and performing ritual magic as ways to protect themselves from those threats. In other words, the milieu of late Joseon primed even the lower classes to accept what the orthodox called heterodox rites (*sagyo* 邪教) when those practices promised relief from worldly suffering. The founders of the new religions, who came from or lived among these lower strata, internalized and innovated upon these practices in forming their own religious movements.

These differences between Choe Je-u and Kang Il-sun manifested themselves in methods and purposes of incantatory practice. Donghak's practice placed relatively strong emphasis on even the ingestion of talismans (*bujeok tanbok* 符籍呑服) as part of its regimen, whereas Jeungsangyo placed greater emphasis on the recitation, rather than ingestion, of incantations. Likewise, Donghak's aim of practice relatively prioritized health preservation and life extension, whereas Jeungsangyo deliberately put more emphasis on the pursuit of prosperity and blessings (福祿) (J. Park 2022).

In fact, in Donghak's *Yongdam yusa*, the "Song of Peace of Mind" (*Ansimga* 安心歌) proclaims that by following the words of Hanullim (Lord of Heaven), offering clear water (*cheongsu bongjeon* 淸水奉奠), and ingesting talismans, one's body is transformed into an immortal spirit with Daoist bones (*seonpung dogol* 仙風道骨) of "agelessness and deathlessness" (不老不

死) and "eternal life" (永世無窮). Treating a talisman as an elixir of immortality to be swallowed stands in clear contrast with the practices of meditative Daoism (*suryeon dogyo* 修鍊道教), where through inner or outer alchemy via breathing or meditation one aims to achieve longevity. Yet the Donghak song exalts the effectiveness of this talismanic medicine, saying it is so excellent that it makes Qin Shi Huang and Emperor Wu of Han (who vainly sought elixirs of immortality) objects of ridicule, and that it is so precious one "would not trade it for gold or silver." In so doing, this song prioritizes the value of an immortal lifespan even above worldly power or wealth.

In contrast, Kang Jeungsan focused more on fortune (*rok* 祿) than on longevity as the outcome of practice. He criticized Donghak for being overly skewed toward Heaven's ideal at the expense of Earth's reality. Kang Jeungsan famously said,

> From the day Donghak rises, fortune falls. Fortune attaches itself to Earth (坤); yet Donghak, by advocating only "Serve Heaven, and creation is settled" (侍天主造化定), leans solely toward Heaven. And though it speaks of "longevity and blessings" (壽命福祿), if one's life is long but one has no blessings, that is worse than death—thus it puts lifespan first and blessings last. Therefore, now put blessings first. (Jeungsando Dojeon Compilation Committee. 2003, 9:130)

In this way, Kang Jeungsan explicitly taught that the pursuit of blessings and prosperity should take precedence in the new era, thereby accommodating the realistic aspirations of the masses for well-being within a religious framework.

As a result of these differences, a clear bifurcation is observable: Won Buddhism and Daejonggyo, similarly to Cheondogyo (the successor of Donghak), continued along the path of meditative practice aimed at longevity (spiritual self-cultivation), whereas the Jeungsangyo lineages directed their *seong-gyeong-sin* practice toward the attainment of blessings and prosperity. This highlights the split between an *immortality/inner cultivation orientation* and a *this-world fortune orientation* among the new religions.

Later Heaven Gaebyeok: Pursuit of a Utopian Ideal as a Post-Subaltern Alternative Religion

The modern Korean indigenous new religions all put forward and enacted the alternative religious vision of "Later Heaven Gaebyeok" (後天開闢)—Later Heaven Great Awakening—as a means of overturning the oppression of the ruling class and replacing the established order. In doing so, they can be characterized as post-subaltern religious movements, or *utopian alternative religions*, representing the dreams and ideals of those social non-elites who had no voice in Joseon's Confucian society. Unlike earlier late-Joseon millenarian marginal movements (such as the *Jeonggamnok* prophecy cults), which expressed subaltern discontent and deviation but failed to articulate a structured new order, these new religions explicitly defined the existing order as the old "Former Heaven" (先天) and proclaimed the ideal of "Later Heaven Gaebyeok." In doing so, they fully realized the potential of a post-subaltern utopian alternative religion, providing a systematic vision of a new world to replace the old (Stein 2003; Han 2019; J. Park 2021).

The post-subaltern character of these movements can be observed in several dimensions. It is evident in the social backgrounds of their founders, in the composition and rising status of subaltern members in their early communities, and in their implementation of alternative social visions that stood in opposition to both Confucian norms and colonial pressures.

First, most founders of the modern Korean indigenous new religions were not from the high aristocratic lineages of Seoul, but rather were fallen yangban from provincial areas. Many were what was termed *janban* (remnant yangban)—members of once-elite families that had been demoted to commoner status—or were of socially marginal birth (such as offspring of secondary wives, or *seoeol* 庶孼), or children of remarried women, or *jaeganyeo* 再嫁女. Because of their backgrounds, they were ineligible for the civil service examinations, which meant they could not become government officials and instead lived as part of the lower classes.

As a result, they often took up humble professions appropriate to degraded yangban or commoners: village school teachers, farmers, merchants, or spirit practitioners (*sulsa* 術士). Rather than settling permanently in one

place, many of them traveled from region to region, and through their life among the lower classes they were able to fully empathize with the sufferings of the subalterns. At the same time, being of yangban origin, they possessed the education and literacy of the scholar-official class, which they could harness to formulate new religious ideas. This combination—deep sympathy for oppressed commoners and a literate understanding of philosophy and history—enabled them to found post-subaltern alternative religions that gave voice to the distress of the lower classes and advocated the new ideal of "Later Heaven Gaebyeok." In short, these founders turned their marginal status into a strength: moving from place to place, speaking on behalf of the impoverished and disenfranchised, they preached the coming of a new world (*gaebyeok*) and established new religions offering hope to the downtrodden (J. Park 2021).

Indeed, because the founders were socially fallen aristocrats or of secondary status, they themselves had experienced life as part of the lower strata, which gave them an intimate understanding of subaltern grievances. Yet, as educated members of yangban families, they could use their learning to articulate a sophisticated religious vision. This unique position allowed them to create what we may call a post-subaltern alternative religion: rather than directly seeking power within the existing system, they wandered outside the centers of power, rallying the common folk around a utopian vision of Later Heaven and thus founding new religious movements.

The membership of these new religious communities also reflected a dramatic social shift. In the organization of modern Korean indigenous new religions, the proportion of commoners or low-status people was far higher than in the mainstream of Confucian society, and the proportion of women was notably high compared to men. Those who had lacked any voice under the Confucian order—the subalterns—were often treated equally, and in many cases even assumed leadership roles in these religions. In Won Buddhism, for example, there emerged female leaders, something unheard of in traditional Korean religions. This inclusive tendency was a common thread between the Catholic Church in Korea and the indigenous new religions. In fact, it closely paralleled the situation of the early Catholic Church in late Joseon, which had a congregation composed largely of women and lower-class people.

During the Eulmyo Persecution of 1795, for instance, it was documented

that upper-class women and members of the lower classes (including slaves) took a leading role in the Catholic community. Joseon society, being Confucian, maintained order through patriarchal yangban households led by men, but Catholicism subverted this norm. According to Hwang Sayeong's "Silk Letter" (*Baekseo* 白書), as Joseon law did not typically punish aristocratic women or daughters of noble families unless they were involved in treason, these gentry women felt relatively unconstrained by the bans on Catholicism. As a result, women from noble families made up the majority of early Catholics in Korea, and quite a few of them—such as Kang Wansuk Columba (1760–1801)—played pivotal leadership roles. In effect, if one was not a yangban male, engaging in religious activities did not attract as harsh an immediate backlash. Women and even children were comparatively free from severe punishment or social reprisal. By the early 19th century, as one account notes, "…in the Catholic Society of Illumining the Way (Myeongdeokhoe), women comprised two-thirds and uneducated lowborn people one-third of the members, whereas aristocratic men, fearing worldly persecution, were very few among the believers" (Hwang, *Silk Letter*).

This demographic reality in the Catholic Church alerted the later new religions to issues of inequality and inspired them to promote gender equality, the abolition of class discrimination between yangban and commoners, and respect for children (J. Park 2021). For example, Donghak explicitly criticized the norm of "men honored, women despised" (*namjon yeobi* 男尊女卑) and the inequities of the status system (*bansang* 班常, an abbreviation for aristocrat vs. commoner). Choe Je-u taught that through serving the divine (Hanullim) within, even those of lowly status—commoners, women, the illegitimate-born—could awaken to their own sacred worth, thereby transcending distinctions of high and low, rich and poor, legitimate and illegitimate, male and female. For instance, Choe Je-u denounced both class discrimination (*bansang*) and male-centric "female subordination," transforming the unilateral dictum "women must obey their husbands" (*yeo pil jongbu* 女必從夫) into a mutual ideal of "harmony between husband and wife" (*buhwa busun* 夫和婦順), i.e. reciprocal respect and gender equality.[1] This same spirit

1. Choe Je-u, "Gyohunga," *Yongdam yusa* (Songs of Yongdam).

was clearly visible in Jeungsangyo as well. Jeungsangyo's "work of resolving grievances" (*haewon gongsa* 解冤工事) ritual was, in essence, a performative act aimed at lifting the subaltern status of those despised in society: it recognized that the discrimination against slaves, shamans, and women had created deep resentments (*wonhon* 冤魂), and it ritually resolved those grievances, thereby *de-subalternizing* the oppressed through religious means.

Won Buddhism, building on this kind of subaltern self-awakening, incorporated a Buddhist worldview of interdependent origination to envision a society of "resolution of grievances and mutual life-benefiting" (*haewon sangsaeng* 解冤相生). It emphasized the doctrine of the Fourfold Grace (四恩)—the grace of Heaven and Earth, of parents, of fellow beings, and of the law—teaching that all beings in the universe exist in a network of mutual beneficence. On that basis, Won Buddhism urged people to dissolve mutual resentments and restore relationships of gratitude, thus overcoming all forms of social discrimination based on class, region, gender, wealth, or race (Yoon 2017, 219–220). In these ways, the new religions pursued the Later Heaven ideal of a reformed society, one marked by equality and reciprocity in human relations.

On the other hand, it must be noted that in late Joseon, "Western Learning" (Catholicism) was widely perceived, even by the lower classes, as a religion of material and sexual desire (J. Park 2023). It was denounced as heterodox rites (邪教) that needed to be eradicated to preserve social ethics and the state order. This was a reaction to certain Catholic practices that were misunderstood: for example, the Catholic emphasis on charity (*caritas*) and equality, which treated even outcastes as equals, and the fact that men and women of different classes worshiped together, were interpreted by conservative society as indulging worldly desires (for money or sex).

In 1801, during the Sinyu Persecution, Hwang Sayeong's "Silk Letter," which advocated inviting Western forces to demand religious freedom, reinforced the suspicion that Catholics were traitorous, anti-national elements in league with foreign powers. The subsequent events on the world stage—the Opium Wars (1840–1860) and the growing threat of Western encroachment—intensified Joseon's wariness of the West as the origin of Catholicism. Moreover, the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864) in Qing China, which had

Christian connections, alerted Joseon to the potential political danger of a religious uprising associated with Western religion. These fears materialized in part with the Byeongin Persecution of 1866, where nine French missionaries were executed, leading to the French naval intervention (*byeongin yangyo*). Such incidents made clear to both the government and the nascent new religions the need to frame their movements as ethical, nationalistic, and even post-colonial responses to Western imperial religion. Moreover, epidemics such as cholera broke out frequently during the 19th century—specifically in 1821, 1822, 1833, 1841, 1859, 1860, and 1862 (I. Park 2016). Against this backdrop of intensifying mortal threats from contagious diseases and the growing perception of Catholicism as a religion potentially inciting *popular rebellions with religious motivations*—especially due to its association with Western imperial forces—Choe Je-u (the founder of Donghak) articulated an acute sense of crisis in his work *Yongdam yusa* 龍潭遺詞. There, he warned of the spread of "ominous epidemic fate" (*goejil unsu* 怪疾運數) sweeping from the West to the Korean Peninsula. In his *Great Compendium of the Eastern Scripture* (*Donggyeong daejeon* 東經大全), Choe further noted that the year 1861 was marked by a society that had turned away from Heavenly Principle (*cheolli* 天理) and the Heavenly Mandate (*cheonmyeong* 天命), trembling in fear and obsessed with self-centered desire (*gakjawisim* 各自爲心). Especially urgent was the condition of the common people, who, facing the "ominous fate of Shanghai" (*sanghae-ui unsu* 上海 運數)—a metaphor for the immediate threat of Western military incursion—were compelled to deliberate over strategies for protecting the nation and securing the people (*boguk anmin* 輔國安民) (J. Park 2023).

Such awareness was widely shared among modern Korean indigenous new religions. A consensus view, spanning both Confucian officialdom and popular religions, regarded Catholicism as unethical, desire-driven, and imperialistic. In this light, the response from the East was inherently ethical, nationalist, and post-colonial. Combined with the rising agency of subaltern actors in the popular sphere, this ethical-nationalist consciousness was reappropriated into diverse visions of Later Heaven Gaebyeok (後天開闢), through which the modern new religions reached full ideological formation.
The confrontational stance taken by modern Korean indigenous new religions

toward Christianity maintained a continuity with the *Confucian ethical consciousness* they had reappropriated. However, the mode of realization of this ideal—via the unfolding of Later Heaven Gaebyeok—varied in character across the different religious movements: In Donghak, Christianity was identified as a religion of *self-centered desire* (*gakjawisim* 各自爲心) that led to social fragmentation, and Choe Je-u proposed a radical "re-opening of the world" (*dasigaebyeok*) as a means to overcome this crisis. Jeungsangyo ritualized this critique at a cosmic scale through the Three Realms Reordering (*samgye gaebyeok* 三界開闢) of Heaven-Earth work (*cheonji gongsa* 天地公事), articulating it as a cosmologically staged redemptive process grounded in the principle of resolution of grievances and mutual life-benefiting (*haewon sangsaeng* 解冤相生). And Won Buddhism (圓佛敎) responded to the materialistic *gaebyeok* (*muljil gaebyeok* 物質開闢) brought about by modernity by emphasizing *spiritual gaebyeok* (精神開闢)—advancing an inward-focused path of mental cultivation and socially engaged ethical practice.

The Expansion and Transformation of Family Ethics: From Confucian Hyodo to Sangsaeng-Based Boeun Ethics

Koreans, regardless of religious affiliation, have long emphasized a family ethic centered on respecting ancestors and practicing filial piety toward parents. In traditional Confucian society, filial piety (*hyodo* 孝道) was one of the highest moral virtues, epitomized in the notion of three bonds and five moral relationships (*samgang oryun* 三綱五倫), and was broadly accepted even by other religions. Joseon, in particular, was distinguished by placing filial piety (*hyo*) above loyalty to the state (*chung* 忠), in contrast to China and Japan, where loyalty often took precedence.

Historically, Korean *shamanism* offered *ancestor worship* as a form of magical rite for the spirits of the deceased, and Buddhism performed similar roles through memorial rituals like rituals for the repose of the dead (*cheondojae* 遷度齋). However, after the adoption of Confucianism, there was a pronounced shift: filial piety came to be understood not as magical pacification of ancestral spirits but as a moral obligation to repay the grace

(*eun* 恩) of one's parents. Confucian ancestral rites thus transformed the focus from the ritual object (the deceased ancestor) to the ritual subject (the morally responsible offspring), repositioning the practice from a mystical obligation to a moral imperative.

In contrast, modern Korean indigenous new religions inherited this Confucian understanding of filial piety yet expanded and transformed it into a horizontal and reciprocal ethic of mutual life-benefiting (*sangsaeng* 相生) and requitting grace (*boeun* 報恩). Instead of emphasizing the moral duty of children to be filial, these religions placed greater stress on the *grace* (*eun* 恩) bestowed by parents as the basis for reciprocal moral responsibility. In doing so, they reinterpreted family ethics—centered on parental grace—as extensible to the state, society, and even the cosmos, and transformed the vertical, unilateral, and heteronomous nature of Confucian *hyodo* into a mutual and autonomous ethic.

First, many modern Korean indigenous new religions recast Confucian *hyodo*—which had traditionally emphasized the father as the locus of patriarchal authority—into a form of filial devotion toward a transcendent deity such as Supreme Lord (*Sangje* 上帝) or Lord of Heaven (*Cheonju* 天主). In Chinese Buddhism, especially during the Tang dynasty, a forged scripture titled *Sutra on the Heavy Grace of Parents* (*Bumo eunjunggyeong* 父母恩重經) was composed to provide a Buddhist response to Confucian *hyo* ethics. Unlike the Confucian *Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiaojing* 孝經, *Hyogyeong* in Korean), which prioritizes the father, this sutra emphasizes the mother and focuses on the *grace* (*eun* 恩) of parents rather than on the child's duty. It also prescribes specific ritual practices, such as *Ullambana* offerings, and the chanting of verse-prayers (*gāthās*) from the *Bumo eunjunggyeong* as a means of requiting parental grace. These practices represent a Buddhist reappropriation of Confucian *hyodo*. The modern Korean indigenous new religions further diversified and deepened this kind of reappropriation.

Modern Korean indigenous new religions reinterpreted Confucian *hyodo* by applying the logic of Later Heaven Gaebyeok (後天開闢) and *sangsaeng* 相生, thereby transforming filial piety into a reciprocal ethic of requitting grace (*boeun* 報恩). In Donghak, filial devotion toward one's parents and religious devotion toward Hanullim (Heavenly Lord) were understood to be equivalent

in spiritual significance. In Jeungsangyo, the principle of *haewon sangsaeng* was extended into a theology of *boeun sangsaeng*, by which ancestral spirits were honored not merely for blessing descendants but to *extend salvation to ancestors* through the religious cultivation of the living. Won Buddhism, in turn, placed emphasis on *attitudes of gratitude*, self-motivated practice, and volitional empowerment, expanding the sphere of ethical practice toward social and cosmic *sangsaeng* (N. Lee 2017).

Particularly, Kang Jeungsan conceptualized filial piety not merely as a personal virtue but as a motivating value that fosters *family harmony* and spiritual merit. According to Lee Eun-hui and Lee Gyung-won (2024), Kang's teachings positioned filial conduct within the framework of *haewon sangsaeng* and *boeun sangsaeng*, interpreting it as both ethical and religious action. Notably, in order to achieve the completion of the Way and establishment of virtue (*doseong deongnip* 道成德立) of one's descendants, he emphasized offering incense and flowers (*hyanghwa* 香花) to the ancestral spirits who granted life (*josangsin* 祖上神) through 60 years of accumulated practice (*jeokgong* 積功), thereby expanding filial piety into a form of religious cultivation (Cha 2016).

However, it is worth noting that from Choe Je-u to Kang Jeungsan, the modern Korean indigenous new religions, while opposing Catholicism as a *religion without father or monarch* (無父無君), did not reject the Confucian three bonds and five moral relationships (*samgang oryun* 三綱五倫) outright. Instead, they first accepted its universal ethical values. Indeed, the move to reframe filial piety from loyalty to one's father to loyalty to a transcendent being—Sangje or Cheonju—was pioneered not by indigenous religions but by late Joseon Catholicism. For example, in his "Letter to the Prime Minister" (*Sangjae sangseo* 上宰相書), Jeong Ha-sang 丁夏祥 (1795–1839) identified the Catholic Sangje 上帝 as Great Father (*daebu* 大父) and Great Lord (*daegun* 大君), thereby superseding the Confucian family and political order and claiming the precedence of transcendent religious loyalty (J. Park 1999).

By contrast, Kang Jeungsan, in his text *On the Sickness of the World* (*Byeongsemun* 病勢文), diagnosed the illness of the age as resulting from the disappearance of loyalty (*chung* 忠), filial piety (*hyo* 孝), and the virtue of female chastity (*yeol* 烈) (Daesun jillihoe gyomubu 2010, 5:38). In this respect,

modern Korean indigenous religions may be seen as inheriting and adapting Confucian ethics. However, they also sought to overcome the limitations of the Former Heaven order of mutual conflict (*seoncheon sanggeuk* 先天相剋) by reappropriating these ethical values under the paradigm of Later Heaven mutual life-benefiting (*hucheon sangsaeng* 後天相生). For example, to challenge the Confucian norm that demanded absolute *yeol* from young widows, Kang Jeungsan declared:

> Loyalty, filial piety, and chastity are great principles of the state. Yet a nation collapses from loyalty, a household perishes from filial piety, and an individual is ruined by chastity. (Daesun jillihoe gyomubu 2010, 1:46)

This critique, inscribed on *soji* 燒紙 (burnt paper offerings) offered by Kang Jeungsan as a form of ritual protest, not only condemned the heteronomous and vertical nature of Confucian ethics, but also called for their replacement by a horizontal, reciprocal, and autonomous ethical paradigm rooted in Later Heaven *sangsaeng*.

Conclusion

The modern Korean indigenous new religions emerged as post-Confucian national religions during a time of crisis brought about by both external threats from Western imperialism and internal contradictions within the Neo-Confucian society of late Joseon. In this hierarchical order where Confucianism served as the official religion and the aristocratic male elite (*yangban sajok* 兩班士族) occupied the summit of the social structure, peripheral religions—such as Buddhism, Seondo, Daoism, folk beliefs, and shamanism—were relegated to the margins. Against this backdrop, subalterns—including commoners, lower-class peasants, and women—envisioned new social possibilities through the creation of these alternative religions, which expressed post-subaltern ideals and challenged both Confucian orthodoxy and the expansionist ambitions of Catholicism. These religions positioned themselves not only in resistance to Catholicism—

perceived as a religion of desire and empire—but also as moral alternatives representing the ethical and spiritual values of the East. The founders of these movements reappropriated diverse religious resources—Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, folk beliefs, shamanism, and even Western Catholicism—according to their particular needs, forming a kind of religious family characterized by family resemblance.

First, in terms of theology, whereas traditional Confucianism in Korea upheld a deistic view of transcendence (*isillon* 理神論), modern Korean indigenous new religions transformed the forgotten and inactive *Deus Otiosus* into an active and personal divine being. Donghak's dynamic view of a Lord of Heaven (*Cheonju* 天主) established the divine as an object of ritual; Jeungsangyo emphasized the incarnate activity of the transcendent Supreme Lord (*Sangje* 上帝); and Daejonggyo formulated a nationalistic Triune God (*samsin* 三神) to correspond with the Christian Trinity. The internalization of Donghak's "humans are Heaven" (*innaecheon* 人乃天) concept led to its Buddhist reappropriation in Won Buddhism as the idea of the Dharmakāya Buddha (Beopsinbul 法身佛).

The emergence of a transcendent, personal, and monotheistic concept of the divine disrupted the traditional cosmology of polytheistic function-deities found in folk religion and shamanism. Catholic doctrines such as monotheism, incarnation, and the Trinity served as catalysts in different ways: inspiring Donghak and Cheondogyo to posit a divine-human unity; prompting Jeungsangyo to assert divine incarnation; and leading Daejonggyo to revive the ancient Triune God faith (*samsingwan* 三神觀), which had been linked to foundational myths and Heaven-offering rituals.

Second, whereas Joseon Confucianism emphasized self-cultivation (*suyang*) and mind learning (*simhak*) under a vertical cosmology that restricted Heaven-offering rituals (*jecheon uirye* 祭天儀禮) to the emperor alone, the modern Korean indigenous new religions democratized ritual access to the divine. Catholicism's emphasis on direct prayer and worship to Cheonju shocked Confucian ritual tradition. In turn, these new religions revived the ancient tradition of Theism (*singyo* 神敎) by associating themselves with Dangun mythology, Heaven rituals, and Seondo, thus bringing about a modern resurgence of theism in Korea. Their theology ultimately represented

a dynamic revitalization of transcendent reality and a strengthening of direct communication with the divine.

Third, the modern Korean indigenous new religions restructured ritual practice and cultivation theory. Inspired by the faith-centered paradigm of Catholicism, they moved beyond Confucian *suyang* 修養 and emphasized the triadic practice of sincerity, reverence, and faith (*seong-gyeong-sin* 誠敬信). This marked an innovative reappropriation of the Eastern cultivation model. While Daejonggyo and Won Buddhism pursued immortality and enlightenment through meditative practice and breath discipline (in the lineage of Seondo), the Donghak and Jeungsangyo movements emphasized magico-ritual methods—such as incantations, talismans, and spirit communication (*tongsin* 通神)—for securing blessings (*bongnok* 福祿) and overcoming misfortune. Within this spectrum, some emphasized longevity (*sumyeong* 壽命) while others prioritized blessing (*bok* 福), illustrating the divergent directions of spiritual pursuit.

Fourth, and most critically, these religions enacted the ideal of Later Heaven Gaebyeok, a utopian vision that subverted the ruling ideology and sought to replace the established order. They functioned as post-subaltern alternative religions, articulating the dreams and ethical visions of the marginalized. The founders were often *janban*, *seoeol*,or *jaeganyeo* who, due to social discrimination, were excluded from the civil service exam (*gwageo* 科擧). This exclusion, however, fostered both deep empathy with the subaltern classes and intellectual capacity drawn from Confucian learning. Through their itinerant lives, they became religious spokespersons for the disempowered, preaching *gaebyeok* as a new cosmological and social order.

The composition of early believers reflected this radical departure from the Confucian elite: commoners, women, and those of low status played prominent roles, and female leadership emerged in ways unthinkable in traditional Confucianism. This dynamic echoed the early Korean Catholic Church, which had a significant base of women and lower-class converts. Just as Catholicism had challenged Confucian patriarchy, the new religions expanded ethical ideals to embrace egalitarianism, reinterpreting filial piety (*hyodo*), loyalty (*chung*), and female chastity (*yeol*) within the framework of mutual life-benefiting (*sangsaeng*) and requiting grace (*boeun*). These religions

did not entirely reject Confucian values, but rather reappropriated them. While affirming the core virtues of filial piety and loyalty, they offered sharp critiques of their vertical and heteronomous application in Joseon society. Kang Jeungsan, for example, argued that an excessive emphasis on *chung*, *hyo*, and *yeol* could lead to ruin. Such critiques were not aimed at rejecting ethics, but rather at reconstructing them in accordance with the Later Heaven ideal of mutual and autonomous living.

In sum, the modern Korean indigenous new religions represented a synthesis of reappropriated traditions, an indigenous response to imperial modernity, and a religious embodiment of the subaltern's vision. They drew together Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, folk religion, shamanism, and even Catholicism into an innovative religious ecology marked by family resemblance. Through dynamic reappropriation, they achieved a modern transformation of transcendence, ritual, practice, and ethics, forming a unique religious pathway toward a new Korean cosmology of Later Heaven Gaebyeok.

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