The 1894 Tonghak Rebellion

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In the early spring of 1894, a massive peasant uprising broke out that involved members of the Tonghak movement, a new Korean religion, as well as many other peasants. It is known through a variety of names today such as the Tonghak Rebellion, the Tonghak Peasant War and the Tonghak Revolution. This rebellion, centred in the southern provinces of Ch’ŏlla and Ch’ungch’ŏng, was the largest one in Korean history and involved many Tonghak adherents in its leadership. Although the majority of the insurgents were not members of the Tonghak religion, its organisational structure helped facilitate the organisation and cohesion of the rebellion. The success of the rebels in early 1894 led the Korean government to appeal to China for aid in putting down the uprising. When China sent troops to help the Korean government, Japan used this as a pretext to send its own soldiers to Korea, even though the Korean government and the rebels had established an uneasy truce by this time. This led to the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895, and Japan’s victory in the war marked the beginning of its ascendancy as a modern imperial power.

The rebellion and the Sino-Japanese War also led to a domestic coup d’état in the Korean government supported by the Japanese. The new administration launched the modernising Kabo Reforms, which changed the traditional governing structure of Korea between 1894 and 1896. This Japanese intervention led to a second stage of the rebellion in late 1894, which was brutally and quickly put down by government and Japanese troops. In spite of the rebellion’s failure, it acted as a catalyst that helped to provoke events that profoundly affected Korea both domestically and internationally. The 1894 Tonghak Rebellion can thus be seen as a watershed marking a new era in Korean history. Its revolutionary consequences are the reason why so many scholars and activists have looked at and analysed this event so profoundly.

What was Tonghak?

Tonghak arose in the last half of the nineteenth century, a period of domestic and international turmoil in Korea and East Asia. Its founder, Ch’oe Che-u, an educated but impoverished yangban, started preaching his new synthesis of Eastern philosophy and folk traditions among peasants and marginalised members of the educated classes in southeastern Korea after a profound experience with the divine in 1860. Ch’oe Che-u had wandered for several years before this,
searching for answers to what he felt was a spiritual void in his life that the contemporary interpretations of Neo-Confucianism that were then prevalent in Chosŏn Korea were unable to answer. Ch’oe Che-u was also socially marginalised because of his poverty and his status as a secondary son born of a concubine that barred him from many opportunities that would be open to a person of his education. He also observed the social problems in Chosŏn Korea and was increasingly concerned by the growing power of the West in China and the activities of Catholics in Korea. Eventually, this led to an ecstatic spiritual experience that occurred during a time of illness. The divine spoke to Ch’oe Che-u in a voice that seemed to come from both within and outside himself, something that would later develop into a belief that God pervades all creation and all human beings. The divine revealed a sacred incantation and a diagram that Ch’oe needed to draw and then burn and drink the ashes so that he could be healed. Ch’oe was indeed healed after following these instructions.

Ch’oe Che-u started preaching about his experience to his family and friends in his local area near Kyŏngju and gained a reputation as a healer with his sacred diagram and incantations. The chanting of the various forms of the Tonghak incantation and the healing ritual were easily accessible to those without much education. Ch’oe Che-u also discussed his experience with scholars and laid out his doctrine in an intellectual style as well. He emphasised how his new teaching, which he called Tonghak, or Eastern Learning, not only combined the best of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism but also went beyond them by revealing the true nature of the divine that was carried within all creation. His goal was to make his teaching a new spiritual foundation for Chosŏn society to enable it to withstand the onsloughts of both power and ideas coming from Western countries. The implication of this teaching was that all human beings, regardless of status or education, carried a part of the divine within them. By applying Tonghak teachings and rituals, one could come into contact with the divine and bring it out within oneself and benefit both the individual and society.

This combination exercised a dual appeal to both people with some education and those who followed a more oral folk tradition. The new doctrine also emphasised a more direct contact with the divine for all people, regardless of education or social class, which also drew a large audience. The popularity of this new doctrine quickly drew the attention of local officials, who were concerned about the appeal of this unorthodox teaching, especially for its deviations from Neo-Confucianism and the threat to social hierarchy implied in the new doctrine. In the end, Ch’oe Che-u was arrested and finally executed in 1864. His new religion was declared illegal, his writings were burned, and the organisation was forced underground.

The new religion refused to die, however. Ch’oe Che-u’s successor, Ch’oe Si-hyŏng, reorganised Tonghak as an underground movement in the 1870s and 1880s. Although Tonghak remained illegal, persecution occurred only sporadically, with long periods of peace in between. This allowed Tonghak to spread and consolidate itself, mainly in central Korea and increasingly in the southwestern part of the country. Again, the majority of the believers were poor agriculturalists, but many of the leaders were marginalised members of the educated classes who were alienated from the Chosŏn political and social system and the orthodox Neo-Confucianism that gave it intellectual support.

Tonghak’s local sections were re-established in 1878, and this was further expanded by the establishment of regional groupings (p’o) that combined many local branches (chŏp) together in a quasi-military style by 1884. Both the chŏp and the p’o were connected to distinct networks of Tonghak preachers and their converts. Six officers helped run the regional organisation, and this was often supplemented by a leader (taejŏpchu) chosen by the leaders of the local branches. Although there is some debate about the exact timing of the organisation of several chŏp into a larger regional grouping, names of the p’o were apparent by 1893 and numbered around
50 by that time. This period also saw a certain standardisation of Tonghak rituals as well as the compilation of Tonghak’s scriptures in both classical Chinese and vernacular Korean. This again allowed it to appeal to a dual audience of marginalised educated people and poorer peasants without much education. It could also lead to different approaches to the faith, a more philosophical one for the educated and another that drew on the rituals based on folk tradition for those who were less literate.

The fact that there were a variety of approaches to access divine power in Tonghak may have increased its appeal among a wider swath of Chosŏn rural society. Tonghak did offer opportunities for the poor and uneducated to be part of a movement that had ways for them to directly access divine power and be part of a network that met regularly and reinforced social relationships outside of normal state-centred structures. The literary tradition within Tonghak was attractive to marginalised intellectuals and permitted them also to find a new way to find spiritual and social satisfaction. The reforms in the religion’s organisation and the compilation of scriptures and other ritual and doctrinal works during this period helped to bolster the effectiveness and the esprit de corps of the new religion. These contributed to Tonghak’s growing success and strength in spite of official government persecution. By the 1890s, Tonghak had strong local underground networks throughout southern Korea loosely united under Ch’oe Si-hyŏng’s religious leadership.

**Early rumblings**

The period from the late 1870s to the late 1880s was also an important period in Korean political history because foreign powers and a new order of international relations imposed by the West affected Korea in its regional position in East Asia. Japan was the first to break down the barrier in 1876, forcing an unequal treaty on Korea similar to those which had been imposed on itself and on China by the Western powers. Treaties were signed with other Western powers throughout the 1880s. However, the Western powers generally had their attention diverted elsewhere, so the main foreign competition over Korea was between Japan and China. This international rivalry exacerbated the official corruption and social misery already existing in Korea, with the added threat of a possible loss of independence.

By the 1890s, Ch’oe Si-hyŏng and other leaders had left their places of refuge in southern Kangwŏn province to pursue their activities in Ch’ungch’ŏng and Ch’ŏlla provinces, where the majority of Tonghak believers were now concentrated. After years of relative relaxation, local government persecution of Tonghak started increasing in Ch’ungch’ŏng and Ch’ŏlla, further indicative of Tonghak’s growth in these regions and growing government ideological defensiveness. Tonghak believers also became more vocal about their desire to clear the name of their founder and legalise their religion. This was given further impetus by the legalisation of Catholicism as a result of the Franco-Korean treaty in 1886. In common with other Koreans, Tonghak followers were also victims of government corruption which led to land and tax abuses. Many were also resentful of the growing presence of Japanese merchants, who were not averse to exploiting and swindling Korean peasants.

All these grievances combined together in two petition movements by Tonghak followers in 1892 and 1893 to clear Ch’oe Che-u’s name. The petition in 1892 was given from a mass meeting near Chŏnju to the governors of Ch’ŏlla and Ch’ungch’ŏng provinces. This was done without Ch’oe Si-hyŏng’s permission by local Tonghak leaders. The movement aimed to dissociate Tonghak from the label of heterodoxy. The petition was couched in very traditional Confucian terms and asserted that Tonghak was not heretical, but instead united the best of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, and was substantially similar to Confucianism in its
principles. It also denounced the activities of Japanese merchants which brought difficulties to the people and also complained that there was too much Western and Japanese influence in Korea. Finally, the petition also protested against the persecution of Tonghak believers and demanded the release of Tonghak prisoners and the clearing of Ch’oe Che-u’s name. The movement had both political but also very religious demands.

The 1892 petition was rebuffed and as the persecutions and abuses continued, pressure mounted for another petition movement in 1893. Taking advantage of the birth of a royal prince, the petitioners were able to mix with the celebratory crowds in the capital to stage a mass march by Tonghak followers that brought the petition to the gates of the royal palace itself. The movement continued to pledge loyalty to the king and emphasised that Tonghak doctrine combined the best of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, all of which were allowed by the state. However, unofficial actions by some of the petitioners, such as the posting of threatening placards on the property of Christian missionaries, revealed a strong anti-Western and anti-Japanese stance among many of the protestors. There may even have been a desire to overthrow the government on the part of others. The government accepted the petition and told the demonstrators to disperse, which they did. However, no action was taken afterwards to satisfy their demands. The movement also wound down as prominent Tonghak leaders around Ch’oe Si-hyang were worried about the potential for violence, which they opposed. There was also apparently increasing dissatisfaction from many Tonghak petitioners that the movement was taking a more political tone, focussing more on political reforms and anti-foreign campaigns than on clearing Ch’oe Che-u’s name and the legalisation of Tonghak.

It is interesting to note that Ch’oe Si-hyang was not the prime mover behind these demonstrations. He gave in to pressure from other Tonghak leaders, chiefly from Ch’olla province, to go forward with the petitions. It is likely that he did this because these leaders were going to go ahead with these actions anyway and he wanted to maintain some control over the whole process. Still, Ch’oe Si-hyang originally opposed these movements, mainly because he did not think that it was an opportune time to engage in such action. Ch’oe Si-hyang emphasised passive reform, spiritual regeneration, and the importance of organising Tonghak to improve its effectiveness in spreading its spiritual message. Growing pressure, especially from leaders and believers from Ch’olla province, forced him to compromise and allow actions that he was not comfortable with.

The events surrounding the petition movement also revealed increasing tensions between Ch’oe Si-hyang and those close to him and other Tonghak leaders who may have had a broader socio-political agenda than Ch’oe Si-hyang. This may have led to differences in doctrine and religious priorities. These trends may have been reinforced by Tonghak’s leadership and organisational structure, which was only loosely centralised around Ch’oe Si-hyang’s leadership. This decentralised structure was effective in an era of underground preaching but made coordination more difficult between different Tonghak leadership networks and had the potential of giving rise to independent streams of teaching and authority. This made it more difficult for Ch’oe Si-hyang to keep control over local congregations, especially at a time of persecution that caused difficulties in communications. This difficulty would again reveal itself in the course of the 1894 rebellion.

The first stage

Although the main Tonghak leadership wanted to settle their grievances with the government through peaceful means, events took a violent turn when Chŏn Pong-jun, a local Tonghak leader in Kobu in the southwestern province of Ch’olla, started an armed rebellion in the spring
of 1894 after Tonghak followers and other peasants were abused by corrupt officials. This was to become the largest peasant revolt in Korean history, with repercussions both domestically and internationally.

The Kobu uprising began in the first lunar month of 1894 and was led by Chŏn Pong-jun, a local Tonghak leader. There is a great deal of confusion surrounding many events connected to 1894 because it was such a chaotic time and there was a large variety of localised issues that overlapped with the major events of the two stages of the rebellion. As well, local leaders often acted for their own motivations with little coordination with the national movement. We actually know little about Chŏn Pong-jun, except through the small number of petitions that he sponsored and through the minutes of his trial. He first gained prominence in Tonghak during the 1893 petition movement and seems to have had contacts with anti-foreign officials and the Taewŏn'gun, King Kojong’s father, who was well known for his anti-foreign tendencies but who was now marginalised. It appears that he was a fairly recent convert to the faith, although his local influence and dynamism quickly brought him to prominence in local Tonghak circles in Ch’ŏlla province. It is highly likely that he was a fallen yangban, just like Ch’oe Che-u and many others in the Tonghak leadership, although he could also have been a wealthy commoner. There was a wide variety of backgrounds in the rebellion’s leadership and many of them were educated. Although most of the rebel fighters were mainly from the lower agricultural classes, a large proportion of the leadership came from the marginalised educated classes or rich farmers, along with poor farmers.

Although the 1894 rebellion is often known as the Tonghak Rebellion or Tonghak Revolution, only a minority of the peasant rebels were Tonghak followers. However, there were many conversions to Tonghak during the different stages of the uprising. Even in the initial uprising in Kobu, only about 300 of the approximately 500 rebels were Tonghak followers. Others had close personal relations with Chŏn Pong-jun. Still, Tonghak believers formed an important part of the leadership and the rank and file, and this continued through the next stages of the rebellion. It could be that Tonghak’s congregational organisation, and most importantly, its recent role in the petition movements of the past couple of years, already provided experience in organisation for political and social action that gave Tonghak followers a prominent role in the 1894 rebellion’s organisation.

Local problems had motivated the original uprising, but the close contacts between Chŏn and other like-minded Tonghak believers in Ch’ŏlla led to the growing spread and success of the rebellion. About a month after the beginning of the Kobu uprising, letters were sent by the Kobu rebels to other Tonghak congregations in Ch’ŏlla province. Demands were made to reform corruption in official circles while maintaining support for the king and the welfare of the nation. However, not as much emphasis was placed on what had been traditional Tonghak demands, such as religious freedom or the clearing of Ch’oe Che-u’s name. Uprisings spread throughout much of Ch’ŏlla province. There were some uprisings in Ch’ungch’ŏng and Kyŏngsang provinces as well, but they quickly dispersed. A possible reason is that Ch’oe Si-hyŏng’s authority was stronger here and he may have been more successful in ordering Tonghak followers in these provinces to cease their actions.

Not all Tonghak believers were involved in the uprising led by Chŏn Pong-jun. Ch’oe Si-hyŏng’s initial reaction was lukewarm at best. He seemed resigned to the fact that the rebellion had happened and praised Chŏn’s motivations of filial piety and humanity. However, he ordered Chŏn not to be hurried in his actions and to desist and not defy the will of Heaven. Chŏn obviously disregarded this order and so did most of the leadership in Ch’ŏlla province that followed in the rebellion. However, most of the Tonghak organisation elsewhere, including most of the senior leadership that was going to assume a prominent role in Tonghak in the years after 1894,
decided to follow Ch’oe Si-hyŏng’s leadership and did not participate in the spring uprising. In spite of this, there appears to have been little outward hostility between Ch’oe Si-hyŏng and Chŏn Pong-jun. Some scholars believe that Ch’oe’s support of the rebellion has been downplayed in historical memory so as to protect his reputation due to the rebellion’s failure.

This division was further reflected with the increasing use of the term namjŏp, or Southern Assembly, to describe Tonghak leaders and followers, mainly in Ch’ŏlla province, who engaged in the first stage of the rebellion. This was used to distinguish these Tonghak believers from the pukchŏp, or Northern Assembly, centred on Ch’oe Si-hyŏng. The term namjŏp is rarely seen before 1894 and appears most often in non-Tonghak government, Japanese and bureaucratic documents relating to the uprising. However, it is clear that Chŏn Pong-jun himself started to use this term to designate his followers in Ch’ŏlla and to distinguish himself from the older leadership. Some have asserted that this was mainly a geographic designation, and it is true that there was not a complete separation of the Northern and Southern Assemblies and that Ch’oe Si-hyŏng conserved overall religious leadership over Tonghak. However, there are also clear differences in the emphasis placed by the leaders of the two divisions over doctrinal, political and social issues. Ch’oe Si-hyŏng placed a much greater emphasis on spiritual and religious issues over overt socio-political action. Although there was technical unity between these two divisions of Tonghak, criticism between them continued well into the late summer of 1894. This can again be indicative of some of the challenges Tonghak faced due to its loose decentralised leadership structure compounded by difficulties in communication between different regional networks of Tonghak followers.

The success of the rebels alarmed the Korean government. Under previous agreements made with China and Japan, the Korean king appealed to China to send troops to help put down the insurgency. China agreed to send military aid, but this led Japan to exercise its option to send troops to protect its interests as well. The Korean government, realising its mistake, tried to make peace with the rebels in June 1894 by allowing them some input into local government through the establishment of advisory agencies under Tonghak rebel control called chippango that were to help government officials administer areas under rebel control. The first stage of the rebellion came to an end because both the government and the rebels were worried about Chinese and Japanese intervention and this forced both into a compromise that neither side was very comfortable with.

Uneasy interlude

The Korean government’s fears of instability were well warranted. In spite of the peace, neither Japan nor China withdrew their troops from Korea. As tensions rose between Japan and China, the Japanese brought the Korean government under their control by engineering a palace coup in late July 1894. This brought in a new administration that instituted government reforms based on Japan’s Meiji restoration. These Kabo reforms, as they are commonly known in Korean history, addressed many of the concerns that the rebels had raised. However, the fact that Japanese influence was behind these innovations raised suspicions and made the reform regime increasingly unpopular. Clashes between Chinese and Japanese forces in Korea occurred shortly after the coup, making Korea a battlefield in a regional war for supremacy between China and Japan that would culminate in a Japanese victory the following year. The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 was one of the major first steps of Japanese imperial expansion that would continue in various stages up until the end of World War II.

Both the Tonghak rebels in Ch’ŏlla province and the new government in Seoul were increasingly ill at ease with each other through the summer of 1894 in spite of the truce. Many
of the rebels shared popular unease at the dependence of the new reform administration on Japanese support and were distrustful of the foreign ideas on which the government’s new policies were based. The government felt a growing anxiety that the rebels were an alternate centre of power, almost independent of it. The summer of 1894 also saw the establishment of the new chipkangso which gave input into local government, mainly in Ch’ollap province. There were also chipkangso established in some areas of Ch’ungch’ong province and these were supervised by Ch’oe Si-hyŏng. Again, difficulties in communication and differing local conditions led to different versions of the aims of the chipkangso as well as to different actions. Land redistribution appears to have been the main unifying agenda for the chipkangso, but because of the short time that these institutions existed (little more than three months), it is very difficult to see much action on this issue. Tensions between the Northern and Southern Assemblies were also evident, with some evidence of efforts to get certain p’o to switch sides. Ch’oe Si-hyŏng was also concerned at the on-going arms build-up in areas controlled by the namjŏp, seeing it as a threat to the areas under his control. He actually issued an official statement that Chŏn and those affiliated with him were traitors to the state and heretics of the Tonghak faith.

There appear to have been some divisions even within the namjŏps. Chŏn Pong-jun was an important leader in Ch’ollap, but he was certainly not the only one. There were other important Tonghak leaders in the south, such as Kim Kaenam and Sŏ Chang-ok, who dominated their local areas. Kim Kaenam was increasingly autonomous in his area and consolidated his local power without much reference to outside leadership. He was also less cooperative with government authorities, and when the second stage of the rebellion began in the autumn of 1894, he was reluctant to give much support to Chŏn and the other Tonghak rebels. There was coordination between the namjŏp leaders but also increasing autonomous action. Again, Tonghak’s decentralised leadership structure made it not only difficult for Ch’oe Si-hyŏng to impose centralised leadership but also made for a lack of a unified agenda on the part of the Southern Assembly as well.

In spite of this, there were many conversions to Tonghak during this time, especially in Ch’ollap but also in other provinces. However, the situation during the summer of 1894 reveals that there were significant tensions between Tonghak leaders and a lack of a unified agenda among Tonghak believers, even within the rebel faction.

The second stage

Renewed disturbances occurred in the end of the summer of 1894, when government troops attacked Tonghak believers without regard to the distinction between those who followed Ch’oe Si-hyŏng and those who followed the rebel leader Chŏn Pong-jun. This engendered great indignation on the part of both Tonghak factions and led to calls for united action to drive out all foreign troops from Korean soil and reform the government. Although he had condemned many of Chŏn Pong-jun’s actions as illegal, Ch’oe Si-hyŏng agreed to unite with him in joint action to “clear the Master’s [Ch’oe Che-u’s] name and fulfil the Way” in October 1894.

The main motivation in this second stage of the rebellion that now united Tonghak followers was anti-Japanese action and a desire to liberate the monarch from foreign hands. On the new reformist government’s side, a growing apprehension of greater regional autonomy with the new role of the chipkangso likely motivated its anti-Tonghak actions. Although Tonghak followers provided most of the leadership and its regional structure was instrumental in organising the rebel forces, Tonghak’s importance in the second stage of the 1894 rebellion was less obvious than in the first stage and the proportion of non-Tonghak participants was greater. The field of action of the rebels also expanded, some into the central and northern
provinces of Kangwŏn and Hwanghae. Kim Ku, the Korean nationalist activist, joined Tonghak at the age of 18 in 1893 in his native Hwanghae province. In his later memoirs, he wrote that Tonghak’s aim was to form a new people and establish a new nation when the “True Lord would come to Kyeryongsan.” This statement is highly reminiscent of the Chŏnggamnok, an old prophetic and divinatory work that was popular among much of the peasantry. It prophesied the establishment of a new dynasty of justice at Kyeryong mountain and often acted as an inspiration for other peasant rebellions. Again this shows the often different understandings that Tonghak believers themselves had of their religious and socio-political motivations. In his trial after his capture, Chŏn Pong-jun admitted that there were more non-Tonghak participants than Tonghak believers in the rebellion. 3

The forces led by Chŏn Pong-jun and those forces loyal to Ch’oe Si-hyŏng united together in Ch’ungch’ŏng province in November 1894. After a few initial victories over government troops, the rebel forces suffered a terrible defeat with great loss of life in a battle near Kongju in December 1894. The rebel troops scattered into disparate groups and were never able to recover the initiative.

The aftermath

By the beginning of 1895, the rebellion was all but over. The combined Korean government and Japanese troops targeted the main centre of rebel power in Ch’ŏlla and southern Ch’ungch’ŏng provinces. These areas were the centre of Chŏn Pong-jun’s Southern Assembly (namjŏp) faction, which had participated in the first phase of the rebellion. They had been the major focus of Tonghak strength before the uprising, but the military action resulted in massacres of Tonghak believers, the destruction of their religious and military organisation and the arrest and execution of the most important Tonghak leaders of the area, including Chŏn Pong-jun and most of his prominent lieutenants. Many believers also fled, never to return. 4 There was not much left of the Southern Assembly faction on which to build a revitalised organisation.

The case was different for the Northern Assembly (pukchŏp) faction headed by Ch’oe Si-hyŏng and those loyal to him. After the defeat in Kongju, Ch’oe Si-hyŏng fled north with his loyal lieutenants, eventually ending up in the Ch’ungju/Hongju area of north Ch’ungch’ŏng province by the end of 1894. They later fled to Inje county in Kangwŏn province in the first lunar month of 1895. This was familiar territory for Ch’oe Si-hyŏng as he had wandered a lot in hiding in this area during the 1880s. Kangwŏn province had had some sporadic rebel activity in 1894, but there were not as many Tonghak followers as in the southern and central provinces, and the rebel movement was put down. Anti-Tonghak activities started immediately after the uprising occurred, mainly led by local Confucian scholars who were deeply opposed to what they perceived as Tonghak’s heresy. Because of this, there was not as great a need for government or Japanese troops to put down the rebellion in this area. Although government suppression of Tonghak was not concentrated in these areas, the search for these leaders was very intense, and there were many close calls. Government authorities knew that Ch’oe Si-hyŏng had fled towards the east and they engaged in great efforts to capture him. This was to start several years of wandering from place to place amidst great suffering in the mountains of Kangwŏn and north Ch’ungch’ŏng until Ch’oe Si-hyŏng was finally captured and executed in 1898.

Before his death, Ch’oe Si-hyŏng trained new leaders to rebuild Tonghak’s organisation. Son Pyŏng-hŭi took over the central leadership in 1900 and embarked on a program of
re-organisation, preaching and standardisation of doctrine. In 1906, the name of the revitalised Tonghak organisation was changed to Ch’ŏndogyo, in part to signal a new direction for the religion in the midst of the social and political changes happening in Korea in the early twentieth century. Ch’ŏndogyo continued to exist after the imposition of Japanese colonialism and was prominent in the March First anti-Japanese demonstrations in 1919 and in other nationalist cultural and social movements in the 1920s and early 1930s. It continues to exist as a small religion in South Korea today.

The area in southern Ch’ŏlla province continued to be a centre of peasant resistance during the late 1890s. Localised peasant rebellions drew from some of the teachings and most importantly, the organisation of the old Tonghak rebels. Some former Tonghak rebels converted to Christianity (a good example of this is the nationalist leader Kim Ku), while others gravitated to other new religions, including the Chūngsan’gyo movement, in the early twentieth century.

The legacy of the 1894 Tonghak Rebellion

The main aim of the rebellion appears to have been to reform social and economic abuses, and in the second part of the rebellion, to expel foreign troops from Korea. A further complication is that because of Tonghak’s decentralised structure, there was often no unified agenda and there were many conflicting views and trends. Many Koreans have attempted to show that the Tonghak Rebellion displayed a native form of modern democracy and nationalism in order to prove that Korea was going through the stages of progress that evolutionary ideologies such as Marxism and modernisation theory laid out as necessary for progress and development. However, this can be highly debatable, especially in view of the movement’s fragmentation and lack of a unified agenda. The modern ideas of democracy and nationalism had foreign origins, and Tonghak was not in contact with these foreign ideas at the time of its founding or at the time of the 1894 rebellion. The fact that the Tonghak rebels may not have had an organised programme that could bring in modern nationalism and democracy in no way reduces their historical importance or minimises their fight against injustice. Although the 1894 rebellion was ultimately unsuccessful, it helped spark developments that helped reform much of the corruption in government. It also provoked events that led to the introduction of those institutions and ideas that led to profound changes to the structure of the state and started a debate concerning the direction of the nation in an increasingly unstable East Asia. Ironically, these changes were initiated by a government that was supported by the Japanese, the exact opposite of what the Tonghak rebels wanted. In spite of this, immense changes resulted from the rebellion and Korea would never be the same again. As a result, the 1894 rebellion proved a watershed which helped to open up a new era in Korean history.

Because the consequences of the rebellion heralded a new phase in Korean history, modern Korean historians, from communists to right-wing nationalists, have written abundantly on the 1894 Tonghak peasant revolutionary movement, each trying to incorporate it into their interpretation of Korean history. The struggle of oppressed peasants against a corrupt and exploitative regime and the rebels’ fight against the Japanese invaders is a great inspiration for present-day fights against injustice and threats to the nation. Many studies of the 1894 Tonghak Rebellion are focussed on its value as an example of a heroic popular nationalist struggle.

Mainstream South Korean nationalist histories usually consider Tonghak as being a response to the problems of the nation during the late Chosŏn dynasty. The following quote from an article by Shin Yong-ha is typical of many assessments of Tonghak by South Korean historians:
Tonghak, established in 1860 by Ch’oe Che-u, was a religious thought founded and propagated to ‘sustain the nation and provide for the people (poguk anmin)’ and ‘save the oppressed people (kwangje ch’angseng)’ by achieving a simultaneous breakthrough in the national and the feudal crises which the Korean people faced in the mid-19th century. (Shin Yong-ha 1994: 59)

Another Korean historian, Lee Young-ho, is even clearer as to the nationalist credentials of Tonghak in the 1894 rebellion:

The Peasant War of 1894 was an anti-feudal and anti-imperialistic movement with the aim of establishing a modern nation-state by overcoming the feudal and national crises. (Lee Young-ho 1994: 90)

These are good examples of the general consensus that Tonghak was anti-feudal and nationalist in nature during the 1894 peasant uprising. Tonghak is deemed to have been created to overthrow the Chosón dynasty’s governmental and social structure and contained within it the indigenous seeds that could lead to the creation of a modern nation-state with democratic elements to replace the old “feudal” system. According to this viewpoint, Tonghak combined the common people’s desire for social justice, relief from oppression and participation in government with the defence of the nation from foreign, especially Japanese, incursions.

Young-ick Lew (1991) is one of a minority of historians who see the ideology of the 1894 Tonghak Rebellion as a proto-nationalist, rather than a fully-fledged modern nationalist, movement. He asserts that Tonghak at this time was more inspired by the Neo-Confucian “Way of the Sages” than by ideas of modern nationalism or democracy. However, he does agree that Tonghak “was infused with a strong patriotic ardour, a burning desire to protect the nation from foreign aggression, and with the egalitarian dream of abolishing the yangban class system.” In this he is generally joined by the few foreign historians who have done much work on Tonghak. The first major English-language work by Benjamin Weems (1964) was a short, general work mainly concentrating on internal events of the religion and how it interacted with the changes in Korean society. More recently, books by Paul Beirne (2009) and George Kallander (2013) have also focussed more on the internal religious history of Tonghak and its doctrines and structure rather than engaging in the nationalist debate.

In general, the Tonghak peasant uprising of 1894 is seen within a wider context of other movements which arose in the 1890s, including the Kabo reforms of 1894–1896 and the Independence Club in 1896–1898. These are all deemed important in contributing to early modernising nationalism in Korea. Starting from the early 2000s, there has been a growing trend among mainstream Korean historians to look at the complexities of the rebellion itself and also on its consequences. This has helped to move some of the Korean debate about Tonghak beyond the “nation” question (although it is still important) and has added a welcome, more multi-faceted view of Tonghak and the rebellion.

In the late 1960s, the minjung movement arose as a resistance movement against the military regimes that ruled South Korea from the early 1960s to the mid-1980s. The word minjung was coined late in the nineteenth century from two Chinese characters meaning “the people” and “a group or mass.” The minjung movement in the late twentieth century interpreted it as meaning the “oppressed mass of the people” who are the true locus of the nation and who produce change in history.

Minjung historiography has some similarities to Marxism. As opposed to class struggle in Marxism, however, the minjung can be a class coalition of all the oppressed (labourers, peasants,
artisans, dissident intellectuals, etc.), albeit mainly from the lower strata of society. The *minjung* are deemed to cause change in history in their attempts to regain their subjectivity (*chuch'esŏng*) and exercise their rightful role in society. Since the composition of the *minjung* can be different in various periods of history, *minjung* historians search for groups and movements that can be said to constitute the *minjung* in different points of Korean history. *Minjung* historiography accepts some of the premises of more mainstream South Korean nationalism but stresses the importance of popular rather than elite movements. This has influenced later research by more traditional historians, leading to a cross-fertilisation between traditional nationalist and *minjung* nationalist histories.

This has led *minjung* historians to emphasise the 1894 Tonghak peasant uprising as the classic example of a *minjung* movement, mainly because of its origins among the oppressed peasantry. In the Tonghak Rebellion, the *minjung* rises up to destroy oppression and protect the nation. One of the most prominent *minjung* historians, Kang Man-gil, considers the Tonghak Rebellion “a large-scale anti-imperialist and anti-feudal struggle that has important significance in the history of the struggle of our *minjung*.” The exaltation of the Tonghak movement implies a rejection of the more elite nationalist movements, such as the Kabo Reforms and the Independence Club, that also occurred around this time and which are traditionally considered as contributing to modern Korean nationalism. This is mainly because they were not based on *minjung* culture. The Tonghak movement is thus the proper place to look for the *minjung* dynamic and spirit and the true locus of the beginnings of modern Korean nationalism. As demonstrated by Nancy Abelman (1996) and Namhee Lee (2007), among others, historical memory of the rebellion and its leaders, notably Chŏn Pong-jun, played an important part in the art, music and motivational practices of the student, farmer, and labour movements in the 1970s and 1980s.

Another important stream of nationalism is that incarnated by North Korea. The relationship between the North Korean Communist regime and Tonghak/Ch’ŏndogyo is a mixed one. In the late 1920s, some Ch’ŏndogyo believers founded a political party, the Ch’ŏndogyo ch’ŏngudang (Ch’ŏndogyo Young Friends’ Party) that advocated national self-strengthening on the basis of Ch’ŏndogyo values. The northern wing of Ch’ŏndogyo’s political party was forced into a coalition with the Korean Workers’ Party, along with the northern wing of the Korean Democratic Party, and this structure still technically exists today, although the Korean Workers’ Party selects and controls the members of the two other parties. However, Ch’ŏndogyo as a religion, like any religion in the north, is tightly controlled.

This leads to a mixed assessment of Tonghak’s and Ch’ŏndogyo’s contributions to Korean history. The official North Korean history, *Chosŏn chŏnsa*, praises the foundation of Tonghak by Ch’oe Che-u as a movement to oppose Chosŏn’s feudal system and incursions by foreigners. The greatest weakness of Tonghak is that this desire was encapsulated in the form of “religious superstition,” which restricted the development of a “social consciousness.” The Tonghak Rebellion was important in promoting the demise of Korean feudalism, but the lack of a proletariat to lead the struggle doomed it to failure and weakened its “anti-imperialistic fighting consciousness.” Tonghak activities tend to be lumped into a “bourgeois phase” that includes the activities of the Independence Club and culminates in the March 1919 demonstrations, which is the terminal point of this stage.

In spite of the Tonghak Rebellion’s failure, it set off events such as the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 that marked the rise of Japanese imperialism, which eventually snuffed out Korea’s independence in 1910. It also had a profound impact domestically, leading to the Kabo Reforms of 1894 and thereby launching a debate in Korea on nation-building and self-strengthening that would have a profound effect on Korea, even as it eventually became colonised by Japan. The rebellion’s precedent of the lowly, the oppressed and the disenfranchised rising up against
corruption and injustice still provides inspiration to contemporary movements for social justice and continues to be an important ingredient in the building of Korean identities. The rebellion’s on-going legacy still resonates today.

Notes
1 It has become fashionable to use the term “Tonghak Revolution” in South Korea, especially among progressive circles that attach a positive value to revolution as a change of political and social order. However, in English, the use of the word “revolution” tends to be applied to successful uprisings in which the rebels themselves take over government and establish a new order based on their agenda. As will be seen, the Tonghak peasant rebels were ultimately unsuccessful in their uprising and the application of their agenda. This is the reason that this article will refer to this event as a rebellion rather than a revolution. However, this does not mean that this event did not have wide-ranging consequences that had a strong effect on Korea’s domestic and international circumstances.
2 Some Tonghak believers outside of Ch’ŏlla province also staged disturbances during the spring phase of the rebellion, and some Tonghak branches in Ch’ŏlla apparently were not active at this time. There appears to have been some overlap.
3 English translations of sections of Chŏn Pong-jun’s trial and other documents related to the Tonghak Rebellion can be found in chapter 30 of Yong-ho Ch’oe et al. 1997, Sources of Korean Tradition, Volume 2, Columbia University Press, New York.
4 The most recent official Ch’ŏndogyo history, the Ch’ŏndogyo yaksa, asserts that there may have been up to 500,000 people massacred in the aftermath of the failure of the rebellion. It is difficult, however, to get an exact number of the people killed in the months following the rebellion.

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