

FOUNDATIONS FOR THE LEGITIMATION OF THE TONGHAK PEASANT ARMY AND AWARENESS OF A NEW POLITICAL ORDER

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At present, there are two contrasting views on the historical significance of the Tonghak 東學 peasant uprising: first, that the uprising was a step towards a modern society; second, that it was a “conservative rebellion.” Controversies and arguments all narrowly focus on whether or not the Tonghak peasant uprising aspired to modernity, and since researchers have tended to highlight those parts of the statements, actions, and demands of the insurgents that were advantageous to their own cause, our understanding of the uprising has been restricted rather than broadened by this debate.

In order to achieve a more balanced assessment, this article probes the motives behind the Tonghak peasant uprising against the background of the governing system and ideology of Chosŏn society, while also considering the varied social customs and experiences of the people at that time. The members of the Tonghak peasant army internalized and appropriated Confucianism to justify their actions with the aim of restoring the Confucian ideology of *minbon* and *injŏng*, which had been abandoned by government officials. They did not fundamentally reject or try to overthrow the governing system of the Chosŏn dynasty, nor did they deny the validity of the institution of kingship. In this regard, the political awareness of the armed peasants was far from modernist, as they were still influenced by the existing Confucian political culture of benevolent governance. Yet, in their forceful insistence that they were entitled to benevolent government, they betrayed a mindset that had been lacking in earlier centuries and may be regarded as a precursor of a more democratic consciousness.

Keywords: Tonghak peasant uprising, Confucian political culture, benevolent governance, *minbon*, Chŏn Pongjun, Confucian ideology

I. INTRODUCTION

The Tonghak peasant uprising was the largest popular movement in the 500-year history of the Chosŏn period. Beginning in March 1894, it lasted for close to a year, and for several months assumed control over various counties and prefectures. It also indirectly triggered the Sino-Japanese War and led to the Kabo Reforms, which are considered to be the first ever modern reforms in Chosŏn. Following the uprising and right up to the present day, there have been various changes in the way it has been designated and divergent opinions and views on the nature of the uprising.¹ In Korean academia, two contrasting views of its historical character, however, have outlasted the others: first, that the uprising was a step towards a modern society; second, that it was a “conservative rebellion” that reflected no “modern” outlook or ideal at all. The former view has been supported by the majority of Korean researchers, whether they regard the Tonghak peasant uprising as similar to the civil revolutions of the West,² or cite Friedrich Engels’s Peasant War theory³ to interpret it. Their interpretations have been part of an effort to overcome colonial views of Korean history and detect autonomous developments toward modernity before foreign influences made

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¹ See G. Kallander, “Eastern Bandits or Revolutionary Soldiers? The 1894 Tonghak Uprising in Korean History and Memory,” *History Compass* 8 (2010), 1126–1141; George L. Kallander, *Salvation through Dissent: Tonghak Heterodoxy and Early Modern Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013) presents a more detailed discussion of the Tonghak religion and translations of important texts. At the time of the Tonghak peasant uprising and for a long period afterwards, Korean intellectuals viewed the uprising negatively, calling it “the disturbance of the Tonghak bandits,” but Isabella B. Bishop who visited Korea in the 1890s, evaluated it as an “armed reform movement,” caused by “armed reformers” rather than “rebels.” Much later, Benjamin Weems characterized it as “the first Korean reform movement,” while Susan S. Shin (1978–1979) characterized it as a “revolution” and called it the “Kabo Peasant War.” Indeed, there are many Western researchers who have evaluated it positively. For a detailed introduction to this issue, refer to Young Ick Lew (Yu Yŏngik), “The Conservative Character of the Tonghak Peasant Uprising,” *The Journal of Korean Studies* 7 (1990), 151, footnote 2.

² In research of this kind, represented by Shin Yong-ha, “The Revolutionary Movement of the Tonghak Peasant Army of 1894,” *Korea Journal* 29:10 (October 1989), 28–33, the uprising is referred to as the “Tonghak revolution” (*Tonghak hyŏngmyŏng*), or “Tonghak revolutionary movement” (*Tonghak hyŏngmyŏng undong*).

³ An article that reflects this view is An Pyŏng-uk and Park Chan-seung, “Historical Characteristics of the Peasant War of 1894,” *Korea Journal* 34:4 (Winter 1994), 101–113. Such research refers to the events as the “Kabo Peasant War,” the “Peasant War of 1894” or the “Tonghak Peasant War.”

themselves felt.⁴ In the words of George Kallander, according to this interpretation the Tonghak–peasant coalition was rescripted “as a modern antiforeign nationalist movement... marking a sharp transition out of “feudalism”.”⁵ The latter view is that of a minority group led by the prominent conservative historian Yu Yŏngik (Young Ick Lew), whose views will be discussed below.⁶

However, because such controversies and arguments all narrowly focus on whether or not the Tonghak peasant uprising aspired to modernity, and researchers have tended to highlight those parts of the statements, actions, and demands of the insurgents that were advantageous to their own arguments, our understanding of the uprising has been restricted rather than broadened by this debate. A more nuanced interpretation should distance itself from the conservative-modernist dichotomy. Popular movements are influenced by a variety of factors, by the governing system or ideology as well as by the social customs and varied experiences of the people, which together create a unique culture. Hence, to identify the nature of the Tonghak peasant uprising and the ideology of the people as exemplified in the protest, there is a need to understand the notions, actions and claims of the peasant army in connection with the governing system and ideology, as well as with the social characteristics of the times.

Taking this into serious consideration, this article aims to provide a new understanding of the characteristics of the Tonghak peasant uprising by examining whether the ideological foundation of the justifications that the armed peasants used for their actions, and their experience of the popular movement based on this, opened up any kind of new political order. For this purpose this article will analyze the manifestoes in which the Tonghak peasant army presented their claims, the actions of the armed peasants, and also the statements and actions of Chŏn Pongjun (全琫準 1854–1895), their supreme leader, from the period when the uprising was in progress and from the time when he was on trial after his arrest. I will start with an analysis of the “Manifesto” (*p’ogomun* 布告文) issued by the peasant army to declare the beginning of the Tonghak peasant uprising in March 1894. Written in Chinese and amounting to 406 characters, the “Manifesto” expresses the objectives of the uprising and the logic according to

⁴ Cf. Kim Hŭnggyu, “Chongch’ijok kongdongch’e ŭi sangsang kwa kiŏk: tanjŏlchŏk kŭndaejuŭi rŭl nŏmŏsŏn Han’guk/Tongasia minjok tamnon ŭl wihayŏ,” *Hyŏndae pip’yŏng kwa iron* 30 (2008) 46–73.

⁵ Kallander, *Salvation through Dissent*, 152.

⁶ Yu Yŏngik, “Chŏn Pongjun ŭigŏron,” [The Righteous Movement of Chŏn Pongjun] *Tonghak nongmin ponggi wa Kabo kyŏngjang* [The Tonghak Peasant Uprising and the Kabo Reforms] (Seoul: Ilchogak, 1998). This is a modified version of Young Ick Lew (1990).

which the actions of the peasant army were justified. For that reason, it proves to be essential for an understanding of the thinking and the aspirations of the insurgents, although up till now its importance has been somewhat discounted in research on the uprising.⁷ To put the characteristics of the Tonghak peasant uprising and its ideology in perspective, this article will, where necessary, compare these to popular protests, governing systems and ideologies in China and Japan, which also belonged to the Confucian cultural sphere but were different from Chosŏn in terms of political system and ideology, and also compare these to similar phenomena in Europe.⁸

II. CONFUCIAN IDEOLOGY REFLECTED IN THE “MANIFESTO” OF THE TONGHAK PEASANT UPRISING

Tonghak was founded in 1860 by Ch'oe Che-u (崔濟愚 1824–1864), the son of a remarried widow and a Confucian scholar from Kyŏngju in Kyŏngsang Province. It included elements of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, as well as of folk beliefs and Catholicism, displayed egalitarian tendencies, and also reflected anxiety about the looming threat of western aggression. Although it was not a religion that fundamentally rejected the governing system of the Chosŏn dynasty, the government regarded it as a threat to social stability. Subsequently, Ch'oe Che-u was arrested and executed in March of the year 1864. Tonghak was suppressed but not completely proscribed by the government, and it continued under different leadership.⁹ In the 1880s, it spread throughout the southern provinces of Chosŏn, strengthening its institutional basis. In the 1890s, its followers felt confident enough to start a campaign for the rehabilitation of Ch'oe Che-u. Around the same time rural society was disturbed by the misrule of local magistrates. The Tonghak peasant uprising was started by reformist Tonghak followers like Chŏn Pongjun, who spoke out about social inequalities and political corruption. Although the organizational structure of Tonghak greatly contributed to the success of the uprising, with adherents of Tonghak playing a leading role, and although the revolt was influenced by Tonghak ideology, it was rooted in

⁷ It is of course impossible to assert with confidence that the “Manifesto” represents the views of all the participants in the uprising, but I regard it as a major clue to the thinking of the rebels who, whatever their personal thoughts may have been, must have been influenced by the rhetoric of their leaders even if initially they did not fully share their ideas.

⁸ It should be emphasized that my aim is to shed light on the nature of the uprising, not on the Tonghak religion. For that reason I will not pay attention to the role of the second patriarch of the Tonghak religion, Haewŏl Ch'oe Sihyŏng (海月 崔時亨, 1827–1898), who initially opposed the uprising and only in a later stage, apparently quite reluctantly, joined it.

⁹ Kallander, *Salvation through Dissent*, 150.

widely felt rural discontent. In previous decades this had already repeatedly erupted in popular protests against perceived injustice perpetrated by the local representatives of the government.

About 4,000 armed peasants who had gathered in Mujang County, Chōlla Province since Mid-March of 1894 released the “Manifesto” on March 20, 1894 (for the complete text see the Appendix).¹⁰ This “Manifesto” is the statement marking the start of the Tonghak peasant uprising, and may be regarded as documenting the concerns of the peasant army. Despite that, there has been virtually no exhaustive analysis of this “Manifesto” until this day. This is closely related to the fact that most research carried out on the Tonghak peasant uprising within Korean academia has emphasized the aspects of “anti-feudal” modernization and anti-foreign nationalism. The “Manifesto” is full of Confucian ideas and terminology and does not reflect the characteristics of modernism, whilst it is lacking in any content relating to anti-foreign influence. Therefore, to back up their arguments many researchers have singled out the actions of the peasant army and the testimony given by Chōn Pongjun after his arrest, which are deemed to show aspirations toward modernity, paying no attention to the “Manifesto.”

As a leading figure among the group of scholars who have claimed that the Tonghak peasant uprising was a step in the direction of modernity, Shin Yong-ha, too, has dismissed the significance of the “Manifesto.” He claimed that because the “Manifesto” was released at the initiatory stage, the armed peasants merely embellished it with the terminology and concepts of Confucianism, using words like “loyalty” and “filial piety” and references to the virtue of the King as the fount of social harmony, in order to get the support of the people far and wide, stressing that they were not revolting against the king, but rather pledged loyalty to the monarch.¹¹ However, most of the statements that the peasant army issued are full of such “Confucian embellishments,” not just during the initial stage of the uprising, but even when the army registered victory after victory, right up to the day when the uprising ended. Hence, it is unacceptable to simply rule out a serious analysis of the “Manifesto” just for the reason Shin Yong-ha presented. Even if one wants to use the term “embellishments,” discounting their

¹⁰ For the fact that the Tonghak peasant uprising started at Mujang, Chōlla Province on the 20th of March 1894, see “P’an’gyōl sŏn’gosŏ” [Original copy of rendition of judgment] in *Tonghak kwallyŏn p’an’gyōl munjip* [Anthology of judgments concerning the Tonghak] (Seoul: Chōngbu kirok pojonso, 1994), 29; *Chuhan Ilbon kongsagwan kirok* 1 [Records of the Japanese Legation in Korea 1] (Seoul: Kuksa p’yŏnch’an wiwŏnhoe, 1986), 57, 113.

¹¹ Sin Yong-ha (Shin Yong-ha), “Kabo nongmin chŏnjaeng ūi che-1-ch’a nongmin chŏnjaeng,” [The first phase of the Peasant War of 1894], *Han’gukhakpo* 40 (1985), 126.

importance, the reason for their use should be questioned more thoroughly. For in some way, the embellishments may very well reflect the ideological configuration and social relations of those times, as well as the consciousness of the peasant army with regard to these, and therefore serve as a key to interpreting the aspirations and mental world of the peasant army.

With this in mind, I will analyze the “Manifesto” in some detail. Its opening words, “Man is the most precious being in the world because he has morality (*illyun* 人倫),” are quite similar to the foreword of the *Tongmong sŏnsŭp* (童蒙先習, First lessons for children), a primer memorized by almost all those who received some education (and who included a much larger segment of the population than just the *yangban* class).¹² It seems therefore that by using those phrases, which even first learners of Confucian principles were very familiar with, the armed peasants wanted to justify their actions as being based on Confucian values.¹³ However, in comparison with *Tongmong sŏnsŭp* which mentioned everything from loyalty between king and subject, and love and trust between brothers and friends, to filial piety and the proper relation of husband and wife, the “Manifesto” subsequently mentioned only the sense of duty (*hyo* 孝) of the son to the father and loyalty (*ch’ung* 忠) of the subject to the king. It should be noted that loyalty of the subject to the king was placed before filial duty. This may be simply interpreted as showing that the “righteous action” of the peasant army was motivated by concern for the destiny of the country, but it also suggests that the perception the armed peasants had of the national crisis included a concept of a polity with the king as its highest authority.

¹² The leader of the Tonghak uprising, Chŏn Pongjun, was the descendant of a poor and declining noble family, and never applied for the highest-level state examination. According to some accounts, he gathered children at Kobu, where he lived, and taught elementary textbooks of Confucianism, including *Tongmong sŏnsŭp*; *Tonghak nongmin chŏnjaeng charyojip 1* [Collection of documents on the Tonghak Peasant War 1], comp. Yŏksa munje yŏn’guso Tonghak nongmin chŏnjaeng paekchun’yŏn kinyŏm saŏp ch’ujin wiwŏnhoe, (Seoul: Yŏgang ch’ulpansa, 1991), 171.

¹³ The “Manifesto” was not a statement written to send to the government, unlike the petitions presented by Tonghak followers to the provincial governor or the king when they were engaged in the movement for the posthumous exoneration of the Tonghak founder from late 1892 to 1893, just before the outbreak of the Tonghak peasant uprising. The passage: “Today’s events might shock you, but do not by any means be afraid” in the “Manifesto” shows that the statement was released to the people, not an appeal to the governing class. Thus, it can be speculated that the leaders who wrote it, including Chŏn Pongjun, phrased it in such a way that many people could understand and accept it, in order to attract more people. Its content is relatively easy to understand as compared to previous statements sent to the administration or the King, which mentioned numerous principles of Confucian origin that would have been too difficult for ordinary people to understand.

The “Manifesto” also describes the disorder of the political and social situation at that time and presents strong criticism of the governing class. A comparison drawn between the peaceful reigns of the legendary emperors Yao and Shun in China and the present suffering of the people under oppressive governance shows that the objective of the armed peasants was to restore an ideal society on the basis of Confucianism, characterized by governance with benevolence (*injŏng* 仁政). The “Manifesto” criticized ministers as well as local governors and magistrates for having abandoned their most important obligation, *injŏng*, and driving the people—the foundation of the nation¹⁴—into misery and the country into crisis because of their extortions and corruption. Yet, the king was not the target of their criticism. The king was described as an outstanding ruler, capable of showing benevolence and creating an ideal society if only he were assisted by honest subjects. This was also the ultimate purpose of the “rebellion” headed by the peasant army; the Tonghak wanted to restore *injŏng* and the manifesto concluded, “Together let us celebrate a new age of peace and prosperity. Let us all bless a new order of holy harmony permeated by the holy virtue of the Sovereign.” This suggests that the members of the peasant army still respected the king, as does the passage in which they stated that they had raised “the banner of righteousness” (*ŭngi* 義旗) to get the nation out of crisis, as grateful subjects who “take our food from the Sovereign’s land and are clothed in garments bestowed by the Sovereign.”

Although they are simply “weak subjects scattered in the countryside,” those armed peasants “raised the banner of righteousness” to “support the state and make the people’s life secure” by getting the nation out of its plight. Because the ideology of the people as the foundation of the nation (*minbon* 民本) was in decline and the principle of *injŏng* lost, the armed peasants showed their determination to “support the nation and make the people’s life secure” by restoring with their own strength what had been lost. In other words, they effectively assigned themselves the task of taking the lead in this.

¹⁴ Although “nation” in this context may not have all the characteristics of the term in modern academic discourse, I feel that rendering *kuk* (國) as such is justified because Confucianism implied a view of the country as an organic whole of which the people formed an integral, and important, part. To the extent that this Confucian view was disseminated among the population, which was to a very considerable degree, the subjects of the Chosŏn kingdom considered themselves to belong to this nation. Boudewijn Walraven has suggested that shamanic songs, which could reach even the illiterate, provide evidence for a wide diffusion of such a concept of the nation by the end of the nineteenth century; Walraven, “Divine Territory: Shaman Songs, Elite Culture, and the Nation,” *Korean Histories* 2.2 (2011) (www.koreanhistories.net), 42–57. The wide diffusion of primers like *Tongmong sŏnsŭp* points in the same direction.

Thus, the “Manifesto” was based on the ideology of Confucianism and interspersed with its terminology. It criticizes the exploitation and corruption of the governing class on the basis of the ideology and language of the governing class itself. In addition, the “Manifesto” shows that the armed peasants realized that in order to “support the nation and make the people’s life secure” (*poguk anmin* 輔國安民) they themselves had to take the initiative in restoring *injŏng* and the role of the people as the foundation of the nation. This was because Confucianism had gradually spread and as a result the peasants, too, had on a large scale and to a high degree come to accept Confucian ideas. But does this imply that the uprising was wholly conservative in character?

III. THE SPREAD OF CONFUCIANISM AND A CHANGE IN PUBLIC AWARENESS

As mentioned earlier, Yu Yŏngik was the first to give a comparatively accurate analysis of the “Manifesto.” He emphasized the “conservative” characteristics of the Tonghak peasant uprising. His writings focus on criticizing scholars’ arguments that the peasant army aspired towards modernity and in his analysis of the “Manifesto” he emphasized that Chŏn Pongjun was a Confucian rationalist who thoroughly complied with the ethical virtues of Confucianism.¹⁵ According to Yu Yŏngik, Chŏn Pongjun used Confucianism as the primary ground for his arguments, and neither he nor his peasant army presented a new, “modern” outlook or ideal.¹⁶ Yu Yŏngik conversely put particular emphasis on the fact that Chŏn and his peasant army instead idealized the “feudalistic” class system.¹⁷

Yet, one should not define the aspirations and mental world of the peasant army on the basis of the “Manifesto” alone. Moreover, the claim that the peasant army idealized the “feudalistic” class system is not formulated explicitly anywhere in the “Manifesto.” If one considers the Tonghak ideology, which denounced class discrimination,¹⁸ or the actions of the peasant army, which increasingly

¹⁵ Yu Yŏngik, *ibid.*, 10.

¹⁶ Yu Yŏngik, *ibid.*, 27.

¹⁷ Yu Yŏngik, *ibid.*, 21.

¹⁸ The egalitarianism of Tonghak can be clearly identified in the concept of *sich’ŏnju* (侍天主) mentioned in “Kyohun’ga” (教訓歌, Song of instruction) in *Yongdam yusa* (龍潭遺詞, Songs of Yongdam), which implies that anyone, without any distinction of status and gender, can enshrine God in his heart. (George L. Kallander, *Salvation through Dissent*, 182: “Do not trust me. Trust God. He is present in your bodies. How can you discard the close and accept the distant?”) The *sich’ŏnju* concept advanced to the *innaech’ŏn* (人乃天, Man is Heaven) concept of Ch’ŏndogyo (天道教), the religion that grew out of Tonghak in 1905. For a recent study of the egalitarian implications of *sich’ŏnju*, refer to Yi Chongu, “Tonghak e issösŏ ch’ŏnju ŭi ch’owŏlsŏng kwa naejaesŏng e

objected to the class system as the Tonghak peasant uprising developed, it is difficult to accept this claim. According to the argument of Yu Yŏngik, the thinking of the Tonghak peasant army was not different from that of the armed fighters led by the elite followers of Confucianism who rejected foreign influences, the so-called *ŭibyŏng* (義兵, righteous armies). While those researchers who argue that the Tonghak peasant uprising aspired to modernity have ignored the text of the “Manifesto” and focused only on the actions of the Tonghak peasant army and the testimony given by Chŏn Pongjun, Yu Yŏngik on the contrary has ignored the actions of the peasant army and Chŏn’s testimony, and defined the characteristics of the uprising only on the basis of the “Manifesto.”

When we look at world history, however, we can see that even during the radical popular protests that happened during late medieval times in Europe it was common for the people to express their complaints or justify their actions through the appropriation of the dominant ideology, or through the use of the language that the governing class understood.¹⁹ The same is true for modern times.²⁰ As E. P. Thompson has said, the masses cannot be free from the constraints and controls of the governing class,²¹ but they have an independent cultural area and a mental world that is different from the governing class. For instance, it is possible to detect some traditional legitimizing notion in almost every eighteenth-century crowd action in England. The concept of legitimation implies that the men and women in the crowd were moved by the belief that they were defending traditional rights or customs, and, in general, that they were supported by the wider consensus of the community.²² According to George Rudé, popular ideology during a popular protest is most often a mixture, a fusion

kŭn’gŏhan in’gan’gwan ŭi pyŏnhwa,” [Changes in the way humans are viewed on the basis of the transcendence and immanence of God in Tonghak] *Han’guk ch’ŏrhak* 23 (2008), 245–273.

¹⁹ For example, Paul Freedman who examined peasant movements that took place during medieval times in Europe, said that those movements used existing, commonplace ideas like “the dignity of labor” or “the closeness of rustics to God” rather than creating a new political or moral vocabulary; Paul Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant* (Stanford University Press, 1999), 295. James White, who did research on peasant rebellions in the Tokugawa Period of Japan, has pointed out that while the elite proposed the values of frugality, humility, and diligence, commoners used these as the basis to justify an attack on the rich; James W. White, *Ikkai: Social Conflict and Political Protest in Early Modern Japan* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1995), 112.

²⁰ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Yale University Press, 1987), 339.

²¹ According to Thompson, “popular culture” was not self-defining or independent of external influences. It had taken form defensively in opposition to the constraints and controls of the rulers; E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1993), 6–7.

²² E. P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present* 50 (1971), 78–79.

of two elements. The first is what he called the “inherent,” traditional element and the second, the stock of ideas and beliefs that are derived or borrowed from other sources, such as hearing a speech or reading a book. The two elements overlap constantly and come to terms with each other,²³ and the “popular” ideology formed as a result of that tends to be ‘forward-looking’ rather than ‘backward-looking.’”²⁴ In other words, while the people make continual efforts to manage their everyday lives, and are also under the influence of external elements, the ideology of the people is capable of conceiving a path towards change. Taking this into account, the argument that the Tonghak peasant army was “conservative” or “backward-looking” just because the “Manifesto” contains elements of the period’s governing ideology, Confucianism, and Confucian terminology becomes less persuasive. A shift of emphasis towards certain elements in a tradition may be sufficient to argue for the presence of radical changes in attitudes to the *status quo*. It is not difficult to trace such a shift in the “Manifesto,” but in order to understand it fully one first needs to take into account the dissemination of Confucian political ideas in Chosŏn.

The fundamental idea put forward by the founders of the Chosŏn dynasty was that “the people are the root of the state” (*minbon*). Based on that the concept of *injŏng*, benevolent governance, implied on the one hand a promise of the ruling class to the people, and on the other hand the right to rule that they granted themselves.²⁵ *Injŏng* was the political form in which the concept that the people are the foundation of the state was put into practice. In theory, the people’s willingness to pay taxes and perform the labor duties that were imposed on them was predicated on the governing class’s behaving in accordance with the ideological principles of proper Confucian government. Initially, before the Confucianization of Korean society had made progress, the governed were not or hardly aware of this. But when more and more people were educated in Confucian principles, the potential grew for another interpretation of the notion that the people were the root of the state: not as a justification for *yangban* prerogatives, but as the basis for a sense of entitlement on the part of the

²³ George Rudé, *Ideology and Popular Protest* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 28–29.

²⁴ George Rudé, *Ibid*, 33.

²⁵ *T’aejo sillok*, [The Annals of the King T’aejo] 1:33a. Since the time of Confucius *ren* or, in Korean *in* (benevolence), had been emphasized as a core moral principle. In the *Xue’er* (學而) opening section of the *Analects of Confucius*, benevolence is explained as the virtue of a gentleman, and filial duty and courteousness are explained as being the basis of benevolence. Mencius, who presented a clearer concept of benevolent government, related benevolence to filial duty to parents, saying “No children with benevolence abandoned their parents.” (“King Hui of Liang,” *Mencius* Book 1) Reducing punishments (省刑罰) and the lowering of taxes (薄稅斂) are given as examples of benevolence.

governed. Although for the ruling elite the principle of *injŏng* always had had the potential to inspire good government, it increasingly was seen by the ruled, too, as a norm that required the governing class to behave decently. Ironically, this was to a large extent due to the effect of government policies to propagate Confucian values.

The ideal of *injŏng* had never been a mere justification for domination. As Edward Shultz has pointed out, compared with the absolute monarchies of Europe the Chosŏn government was much more aggressive and progressive in paying attention to peasants and in making efforts to respond to their requests.²⁶ In the process, various governmental organizations taking care of the demands and welfare of the peasants were established in Chosŏn, while the government strove to spread Confucianism to all layers of the population. The general intention was to facilitate governance by “civilizing” the people, but in the case of Chosŏn several factors made the need for hegemonic domination through this civilizing of the people even more pressing. Fundamentally, all commoners had to perform military service, whereas noblemen (*yangban*) were exempted from it.²⁷ This suggests that instead of depending on governing through military strength, the Chosŏn government considered it mandatory that domination be achieved through the institution of a hegemonic culture that would persuade the commoners to support it.

A fact that facilitated the transmission of Confucian ideas was that the noblemen of Chosŏn lived in the same village as the commoners, unlike in the West in medieval times or in Japan, where their place of residence was separate, and also unlike China, where during the Ming and Qing dynasties nobles and landowners gradually moved to the city. The urban migration of China’s gentry elite continued in these two dynasties and was promoted by the chaos created during the transition of power from Ming to Qing, as well as by frequent rebellions by bandit groups. This migration was speeded up when China developed into a commercialized, urbanized society in the early and middle Qing period.²⁸ In contrast, urbanization of this kind was less widespread in Chosŏn

²⁶ Edward J. Shultz, “Distinguishing Features of Korean History,” *Yŏngnambak* 9 (2006), 413–414.

²⁷ This shows a distinct difference from Japan in the Tokugawa period, where military duty was assigned to the samurai elite, according to the principle of a thorough distinction between soldiers and peasants, and is also different from Europe where generally the nobility had mercenaries under their command, and compulsory military duty for all male citizens was not instituted before the French revolution.

²⁸ Kathryn Bernhardt, *Rents, Taxes, and Peasant Resistance: The Lower Yangzi River, 1840–1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 124; O Kŭmsŏng, *Kukpŏp kwa kwanhaeng: Myŏng-Ch’ŏng sidae sabŏe kyŏngjesa yŏn’gu* [Law and customs; a study on the social and economic history of the Ming and Qing dynasties] (Seoul: Chisik sanŏpsa, 2007), 239–240.

than in China, as the government did not encourage commercialization, and even restricted it to a certain degree. Incumbent local magistrates and most of the elite whose original place of residence was not in the capital lived in rural areas. Noblemen chose to gather together and often lived in villages far away from government offices, avoiding the towns where the magistrates sent by central government resided.

Consequently, noblemen were desperate for cultural means to strengthen their presence within the countryside community, distinguishing themselves from the commoners and “educating” the people. These means included the construction of private Confucian academies (*sŏmŏn* 書院), the actual operation of local Confucian schools (*hyanggyo* 鄉校) founded by the government, the establishment of “village compacts” (*hyangyak* 鄉約), the implementation of village mutual help associations (*tonggye* 洞契) and village regulations (*tongyak* 洞約), the veneration of the sages, the writing down and practice of ethics or norms relating to Confucianism, and relief work. The elite increased their efforts to govern and enlighten the people in the villages more actively from the seventeenth century, after the war with Japan came to an end. As a result, Chosŏn became an even more Confucian country than China in terms of the spread and intensity of Confucianism. To give an instance, Chosŏn’s population numbered 7 to 8 million, but it had more than 600 private Confucian academies in the eighteenth century. This is only a third of the the number of Confucian institutes in China. However, when considering that Chosŏn had a population of one Korean to every thirty Chinese, Chosŏn had about ten times as many Confucian academies as China in proportion to the number of its inhabitants.²⁹ Chosŏn was also at an advantage compared with China in terms of the spread of Confucianism and the degree to which its education had affected the people due to its smaller territory and the larger proportion of noblemen among the total population.³⁰ Such an environ-

²⁹ See Alexander Woodside, *Lost Modernities: China, Vietnam, Korea, and the Hazards of World History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 22–23.

³⁰ Although it is difficult to decide what the scope of the elite is in any given country, it has been estimated that there were about 1.1 million members of the gentry in China before the Taiping Rebellion broke out, and that the gentry included 5.5 million persons when all family members were included. However this is only 1.3% of the total population. After the Taiping Rebellion, when the numbers of the elite soared, the number of the gentry is estimated to have reached about 1.45 million, which is 1.9% of the total Chinese population; Chung-li Chang, *The Chinese Gentry: Studies on Their Role in Nineteenth-Century Chinese Society* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1955), 139–141. As for the *yangban* class in Chosŏn, although it is difficult to give exact figures, their proportion rose to 60–70% in the nineteenth century when only the family registers from that period are considered. Recent studies have proven that the family registers of the nineteenth century are unreliable, but the proportion of *yangban* already exceeded ten percent during the early eighteenth century, when the indications of social status in the family register provided relatively

ment made Chosŏn a country in which the potential for domination on the basis of Confucian ideology was stronger than in any other East Asian country. This is why various of the requests or statements made by the Tonghak peasant army, including the “Manifesto,” were so full of the terminology of Confucianism, while contents related to Tonghak thought or Tonghak as a religious body were extremely rare, even though the uprising was led by Tonghak followers.³¹ In this context, Mark Setton’s argument that even the egalitarianism reflected in the Tonghak mindset came from Confucian populism and egalitarian tendencies is persuasive.³² Tonghak came into being as a popular religion at a time when the political, economic, and social crises facing Chosŏn, together with external threats, were at their maximum, and aimed to create a new world to overcome these crises, spawning a massive “rebellion,” and yet it could not escape the spell of Confucianism. This is in contrast to the Taiping Rebellion in China, which was equally under the influence of Confucianism but to a significant extent relied on Christianity as its ideological foundation.³³

The masses had received some education from the early days of Chosŏn, when the government set up local schools, *hyanggyo*, in each county and prefecture to “civilize” the people, but their education was greatly expanded when commoners themselves started managing village schools (*sŏdang* 書堂) on a large scale late in the eighteenth century.³⁴ Gathering funds in the form of grain, they

exact information. (Cf. Yi Chun’gu, “18·19 segi sinbunje pyŏndong ch’use wa sinbun chisoksŏng ūi kyŏnghyang,” [Trends of change in the class system and tendencies of class maintenance over the eighteenth and nineteenth Centuries] *Han’guk munbwa* 19 (1997)) The reason for this higher proportion of the elite in Chosŏn needs to be looked into from different angles, but it is important to note that in contrast to China, the *yangban* did not receive any economic advantages other than the qualification to enter the highest-level state examinations and exemption from military service.

³¹ From the moment of the founding of Tonghak in 1860 its propagators had stressed that it was different from Western Learning but similar to the teachings of Confucius. The absence of Tonghak religious ideas in the statements of the peasant army may also have something to do with the motives for the uprising, which was caused by misgovernment and not exclusively joined by Tonghak believers.

³² See Mark Setton, “Confucian Populism and Egalitarian Tendencies in Tonghak Thought,” *East Asian History* 20 (2000), 121–144.

³³ *Baishangdijiao* (拜上帝教), the teaching of the worship of the Emperor-on-High), which gave rise to the Taiping movement was under the strong influence of Christianity (which had used the term Emperor-on-High, Shangdi, to refer to the Christian God), particularly in the beginning, and Hong Xiuquan, the leader of the movement thought of himself as the son of God and the brother of Jesus (see Jonathan D. Spence, *God’s Chinese Son: the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., 1996)). It is difficult to imagine such a movement forming in Chosŏn which was under the strong influence of Confucian ideology.

³⁴ Kwŏn Osŏk, “Sŏdang kyojae e kwanhan sŏjjŏk yŏn’gu,” [A bibliographic study on the Confucian schools’ textbooks] *Sŏjihak yŏn’gu* 10 (1994), 941.

created mutual aid associations and engaged teachers for these schools.³⁵ In addition, the publication of Confucian teaching materials translated into Korean and targeting commoners started in earnest,³⁶ while the number of *sōdang* increased even further during the nineteenth century. In Chōngsōn County in Kangwōn Province, where the dominance of the *yangban* elite was comparatively weak, four *sōdang* had been established in two villages with ninety-five households altogether, according to a survey carried out by O Hoengmuk, who was appointed as magistrate in 1887. These schools had 110 students, which shows that on average more than one child per household was being educated at a *sōdang*.³⁷ A nineteenth-century petition addressed to the magistrate of Kōch'ang 居昌 in Kyōngsang Province to make known the grievances of the local people, contained an expression to the effect that the reading of Confucian scriptures could be heard at every *sōdang* in every village, and that even children no older than seven memorized the writings of Confucius and Mencius.³⁸ This need not be taken at face value, but it allows us to understand the reality of the popularization of Confucianism that characterizes that period. It means that the virtues of Confucianism, as well as the ideals of loyalty and filial piety pursued by the governing elite, were spreading to the commoners. Simultaneously, the commoners were internalizing the meaning and content of the *minbon* and *injōng* ideology propagated by the governing class.

The commoners were internalizing the dominant ideology not only through the spread of education in the eighteenth to nineteenth century, but also because of their experiences during the reign of King Yōngjo and King Chōngjo when the petition system grew in significance,³⁹ while changes occurred in the social order of the villages and efforts were made to raise their social status. In order to raise their position in the rural communities, commoners had first of all to master Confucian ethics and adopt the customs of the *yangban* class in their daily lives.⁴⁰

³⁵ Kim Chunhyōng, *Chosōnbugi Tansōng sajokch'ūng yōn'gu* [A study of *yangban* households in Tansōng-myōn during the Late Chosōn period] (Seoul: Asea munhwasa, 2000), 215.

³⁶ Kwōn Osōk, *ibid.*, 945, 961–965.

³⁷ *Kugyōk Chōngsōn ch'ōngswaerok* [Chōngsōn diary, in Korean translation], comp. Chōngsōn munhwawōn, (Seoul: Kyōngin munhwasa, 2002), 67, 97–99.

³⁸ Cho Kyu-ik, *Kōch'angga: Ponggōn sidae minjung ūi chōhang kwa kobal munhak* [Songs of Kōch'ang: resistance and protest literature of the masses during feudal times] (Seoul: Wōrin, 2000), 191.

³⁹ Han Sanggwōn, *Chosōnbugi sahoe wa sonvōn chedo* [The society and petition system of the Late Chosōn] (Seoul: Ilchokak, 1996); “19segi minso ūi yangsang kwa ch'ui,” [Trends and patterns in the people's complaints of the nineteenth century] eds. Pak Ch'ungsōk and Watanabe Hiroshi, *Kukka inyōm kwa tae'oe insik* [National ideology and perceptions of the world outside Korea] (Seoul: Ayōn ch'ulp'anbu, 2002).

⁴⁰ Pae Hangsōp, “18-segi huban ch'ōnjugyo yanginch'ūng sindo tūl ūi ūisik haemyōng ūl wihan yebijōk kōmt'o,” [Preliminary investigation for the clarification of the consciousness of Catholic

Of course, even if the people would internalize the governing ideology, this internalized ideology could not be identical to that of the governing class.⁴¹ However, the people were gradually realizing that *minbon* and *injŏng* should not simply be the political rhetoric of the sovereigns; these concepts had to be translated into practice in real life, and it was perfectly justifiable to demand this. As a result, the governing ideology was used as a standard on the basis of which the people could demand that the king and governing class would put the ideals of *minbon* and *injŏng* into practice, or could question the legitimacy of the actions of the governing class. The governing class had to act in response to this and take proper measures. For instance, if there was an uprising, its mastermind would have to be caught and executed, but also the magistrates who had failed to stop the protest from snowballing would have to be punished, while even the king would have to issue a royal message, writing an apology to the people.⁴² This signifies that a political culture was taking shape where neither the people nor the governing class would be able to ignore the concepts of *minbon* and *injŏng*.

IV. GROWING ZEAL FOR A NEW POLITICAL ORDER

As we have seen, it is difficult to spot overtly modern elements in the “Manifesto.” It is similar to the countless public appeals submitted by scholars or government officials throughout the Chosŏn period and the manifestos by Confucian scholars who started the protest of the anti-Japanese righteous army (*ŭibyŏng* 義兵) two years after the Tonghak peasant uprising. It does not, however, make sense to regard the uprising as backward-looking just because of its Confucian elements, as expressed in its terminology and loyalty to the king. First, as mentioned earlier, the people tended to express their complaints or justify their actions through the appropriation of the governing ideology or the use of a lexicon that the governing class could understand. Hence, the peasant army’s inner consciousness may be reflected only to a limited extent in such “official”

believers of the commoner class in the late eighteenth Century] in Chŏndong ch’ŏnjugyohoe (ed.), *Han’guk ŭi ch’oech’o sun’gyoja* [The first martyr of Korea] (Chŏnju: Chŏndong ch’ŏnjugyohoe, 2010), 266–278; “19segi chibae chilsŏ ŭi pyŏnhwa wa chŏngch’i munhwa ŭi pyŏnyong,” [Change of the governing order and transformation of the political culture in the nineteenth century] *Han’guksahakpo* 39 (2010), 119–124.

⁴¹ For example, D. Sheffler wrote, “as a result of the spread of educational opportunities for women and the poor, the creation of a substantial literate public served to challenge and reinforce the existing political and religious institutions.” (Sheffler, D., “Late Medieval Education: Continuity and Change,” *History Compass* 8 (2010), 1067–1082.)

⁴² *Ch’ŏlchong sillok*, [The Annals of King Ch’ŏlchong] 48:683b; *Kojong sillok*, [The annals of King Kojong] 2:57a.

documents. Although it is likely that the people accepted Confucian values to a large extent, their understanding of these may in some ways have differed from that of the elite. To obtain a glimpse of their inner consciousness or their thoughts about political and social matters it will be helpful therefore also to examine their specific actions, not only the arguments or demands found in the “Manifesto.”

The Tonghak peasant uprising lasted for a period of about a year. But even towards the end of the uprising the statements the rebels made, and also the “Plan for the reform of misgovernment” (*P’yejŏng kaehyŏgan* 弊政改革案) that they proposed, were never about a leap to a millenarian kingdom or about a complete break with the past. There was no challenge to the political order of the governing system itself either. Most of the reform plan was still phrased in the terminology of Confucianism, and there was nothing revolutionary in it. Though opposition to the aggression of foreign powers is seen in the reform plan, the plan mostly concerns the punishment of corrupt officials, the elimination of unfair exploitation, and the restoration of the tax system according to old precedents.

Of course, behind the actions of the armed peasants were the ideals of social equality and a fairer distribution of wealth. However, their actions were neither a denial of private wealth nor inspired by aspirations to perfect economic equality, because their attacks concentrated on those of the rich who were tight-fisted or exploited the people in order to get richer, not on all those who were wealthy. This can be also seen when they tried to regulate exceedingly high interest rates in the regions they occupied, rather than completely banning private loans.⁴³ Other efforts to prevent a small minority from taking all the profit, forcing the wealthy to sell rice at a very low price,⁴⁴ and impound money and grain from the rich to relieve poverty should also be understood in this context.⁴⁵ This shows that the objective of the peasant army was neither the absolute denial of private wealth nor the perfect realization of egalitarianism, but to counter and punish the acquisition of extreme wealth in ways that were thought to be dishonest, by those who turned a blind eye to the sufferings of the poor. In this regard, the actions and

⁴³ Hong Sŏngch’an, “1894-nyŏn chipkangsogi sŏlp’oha ŭi hyangch’on sajŏng,” [Conditions in the villages under the Local Directorates established in 1894] *Tonghang hakchi* 7 (1983), 65–106.

⁴⁴ *Chuban Ilbon kongsagwan kirok* 3 [Record of the Japanese Legation in Korea 3] (Kuksa p’yŏnch’an wiwŏnhoe, 1988), 214–215; *Tōkyō nichinichi shinbun*, [Tokyo Daily Newspaper] Meiji 27 (1894) August 5, in *Tonghak nongmin chŏnjaeng saryo ch’ongsŏ* 22 [Collection of historical documents on the Tonghak Peasant War 22] (Saun yŏn’guso, 1996), 509.

⁴⁵ *Chuban Ilbon kongsagwan kirok* 1 [Record of the Japanese Legation in Korea 1] (Kuksa p’yŏnch’an wiwŏnhoe, 1986), 10; “Kabo Chosŏn naeran simal,” [Civil unrest in Korea in the year 1894] in *Tonghak nongmin chŏnjaeng saryo ch’ongsŏ* 25 [Collection of historical documents on the Tonghak Peasant War 25] (Saun yŏn’guso, 1996), 137.

consciousness of the peasant army may be understood in terms of a moral economy.⁴⁶ However, the peasant army did not fundamentally deny the governing system, unlike millenarian movements in the West or the Taiping rebellion in China.

During the Tonghak uprising, Chŏn Pongjun told a Japanese individual who visited on July 10, 1894 what the reason for the peasant war was: “The Min clan intercepted our petition to the king, and thus we gathered troops, trying to get rid of those wicked subjects near the king.”⁴⁷ Also, his letter to the commander of the royal forces reads: “the people can no longer endure their worsening living conditions, but whenever we gather hundreds of people and try to appeal at the government office, we are branded ‘a bunch of rebels,’ and whenever we try to appeal at the office of the provincial governor, we are labeled ‘a bunch of traitors.’” As a result, what happened had been unavoidable, according to Chŏn.⁴⁸ All efforts made to restore the abandoned ideals of *minbon* and *injŏng* had ended in failure, the traditional petition system had failed to provide relief, and thus to Chŏn the only option left was to risk his life and take up arms.

However, the armed peasants could not liberate themselves so easily from the hegemonic claims of the Confucian social order. In a situation where they lacked any authority or political ideology that could match that of the king, the alternative they came up with was to suggest the renewal of the governing system, but not a complete change of the system whereby the king had the greatest authority. Considering that Confucianism wielded huge influence as the governing ideology, as long as they could not bring to bear an alternative political ideology, it was hard for the people to imagine that they could disapprove of the king, who held the highest authority in the political system based on Confucianism. In the absence of any ideology or political authority that could overrule the king, to the armed peasants the king would be the last resource to justify their actions.⁴⁹ But

⁴⁶ For the concept of “moral economy,” see James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (Yale University Press, 1976).

⁴⁷ *Jiji shinpo*, [Current affairs press reports] Meiji 27 (1894), October 5; “Records of the Sino-Japanese War,” 12, Meiji 27 (October 16, 1894), *Tonghak nongmin chŏnjaeng saryo ch’ongsŏ* 25 [Collection of historical documents on the Tonghak Peasant War 25] (Seoul: Saun yŏn’guso, 1996), 234.

⁴⁸ Hwang Hyŏn, “Ohagimun” [Stories heard under the paulownia tree] *Tonghak nongmin chŏnjaeng saryo ch’ongsŏ* 1 [Collection of historical documents on the Tonghak Peasant War 1] (Seoul: Saun yŏn’guso, 1996), 70–71.

⁴⁹ This is different from what happened in the West. In France, before the Revolution, new monarchs were greeted with displays of genuine popular enthusiasm and rioting peasants displayed their loyalty in such double-edged slogans as “Vive le Roi et sans gabelle,” while right before the revolution in Russia during the early twentieth century, peasants who started protests showed their respect towards the Tsar too (George Rudé, *Ideology and Popular Protest* (New York: Pantheon

many changes took place as the Tonghak peasant uprising developed. It is highly probable that their initial mindset changed as they were placed in a new situation, with the internal and external changes brought about by the Kabo Reforms, the invasion of the Chinese and Japanese armies, and the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, as well as the quantitative and qualitative changes in the social groups who participated in the uprising, and their experience of the reform of misgovernment. Above all, their massive “rebellion” itself constituted a new experience that was sufficient to grant a “creative dynamism” to the peasant army.

From the outbreak of the Tonghak peasant uprising, the peasant army appropriated Confucian ideology and used it to lambast the actions of the oppressors, showing a strong enthusiasm for the restoration of the ideals of *minbon* and *injŏng* through reform of the government system. In this process, the position of the people in the political arena was revised. This gradually led to the fundamental weakening of the political order that propped up the Chosŏn monarchy, and while that was happening the Tonghak peasant army developed an awareness of the need for a new political order. The officials of the Chosŏn period enjoyed saying that the people, who were at the core of the *minbon* ideology, equaled Heaven and that therefore they regarded them as of supreme importance. In reality, however, they distinguished between those who governed and understood the Principle of Heaven (*ch'ŏlli*, 天理) and the Principle of the Way (*tori*, 道理), and those who did not, and therefore were to be governed. They also defined commoners as morally inferior beings who acted according to their desires without knowing Confucian virtue and were devoid of reason. This definition allowed officials to govern the people,⁵⁰ making commoners nothing more than objects of domination. The people were not only prohibited from intervening in politics, but also from commenting on state affairs. Until the mid-fifteenth century, not just commoners but even scholars who were not

Books, 1980), 32). The West, however, put God, not the King, at the highest peak of the fundamental principles that governed the world. The existence of God, as a transcendental authority, served to make it easier than in Chosŏn for the people to denounce and attack the king. In many cases, the worth of the king was questioned by people who defined themselves as “the people of God.” In Germany, even before the German Peasant War (1524–1525), the Bible became more widely available through translation into the vernacular and came to be the measure of all things. According to Scripture, even in its official interpretation, men were equal (František Graus, “From Resistance to Revolt: The Late Medieval Peasant Wars in the Context of Social Crisis,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 3 (1975), 6). Eventually, during the German Peasant War, the slogans “divine law” and “divine justice” offered the peasants an effective justification, allowing people to view social situations from a fundamentally different angle. (Heide Wunder, “‘Old Law’ and ‘Divine Law’ in the German Peasant War,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 3 (1975), 54–62.)

⁵⁰ Yi Sŏkkyu, “Chosŏn ch’ogi kwaninch’ŭng ūi min e taehan insik,” [Views of the people by the governing class during the early days of the Chosŏn dynasty], *Yŏksa hakpo* 151 (1996).

government officials were denied any say in state affairs, because only bureaucrats, and especially the censors, were considered to have the authority to comment on such matters.⁵¹ After that, scholars were given permission to make comments about state affairs, while a growing number of scholars from rural areas were promoted to be officials of the central government, but comments on state affairs by commoners continued to be frowned upon. The end of the nineteenth century, however, witnessed significant developments in this respect.

From October 1892, before the occurrence of the Tonghak peasant uprising, thousands rallied, protested and submitted written complaints to the provincial governor, to demand the exculpation of their founder and freedom of propagation, despite the fact that the Tonghak followers had been labeled “a bunch of bandits” and subjected to oppression. In February of 1893, they travelled to the capital as a group and prostrated themselves in front of the royal palace gate, appealing to the King for freedom of religion. In March, they launched a mass demonstration across Ch’ungch’ōng Province and issued a patriotic exhortation calling for “opposition to Japanese and Western invasions,” and appealing to government officials to participate. In this way, for the first time, commoners launched a mass appeal to the government. As early as the eighteenth century, members of the local gentry had appealed to the government in petitions and *kasa* poetry on behalf of the common people,⁵² but now the latter spoke up for themselves.

This was an exceptional political act in the light of the political order of Chosŏn, but the Tonghak peasant uprising that took place in the following year had a far more radical meaning than this. Unlike during the movement for the posthumous exoneration of the Tonghak founder, when the people presented verbal and written petitions to government officials and the king, during the Tonghak uprising the people were determined to restore the ideals of *minbon* and *injŏng* with their own strength, by getting rid of ministers and local officials who had betrayed these ideals, and they translated this into action. This amounted to a challenge to the political order of Chosŏn.

The peasant army radically challenged the current political order of Chosŏn, which was justified by the idea that commoners were ignorant but that noblemen on the contrary were capable of forming proper judgments, and which thus

⁵¹ Kim Hunsik, “15-segi minbon-ideologi wa kŭ pyŏnhwa,” [The ideology of the people as the foundation of the nation and its changing during the fifteenth century], *Yŏksa wa hyŏnsil* 1 (1989), 201.

⁵² For such a *kasa*, see “Imgyet’an” in Im Hyŏngt’aek (comp.), *Yennorae, yessaram ŭi naemyŏn p’unggyŏng* [The inner landscape of the songs and the people of yore], (Seoul: Somyŏn, 2005): 45–80.

related social and political status to morality. This fact is also confirmed through the difference between the public announcements and circulars issued by Tonghak followers during the movement for the posthumous exoneration of the founder and statements from the armed peasants during the uprising after the release of the “Manifesto.” How the Tonghak followers and the armed peasants thought about their own political and social status as well as the relationship between government officials and the people at the time of the exoneration movement and after the outbreak of the uprising is seen, respectively, in the following two documents:

*Manifesto for the Movement for the Posthumous Exoneration of the Tonghak Founder
Pasted on the Door of the Poŭn County Office*

We may be ignorant people from remote villages, but since we cultivate the land of our king and serve our parents as we follow the laws laid down by preceding kings, why would there be any difference in our loyalty and filial piety even if differences between subject and commoner, and between high and low social status exist? We wish that our insignificant loyalty be dedicated to the nation, but we have no way to make this known to the king. In our humble opinion, our loyalty to the king, and acts of patriotism for the nation, will pale in comparison with yours as you [the magistrate of Poŭn] are the descendant of a loyal and benign noble family.⁵³

The second text is from the “Manifesto.”

Tonghak Peasant Uprising Manifesto

The people are the root of the state. If the root is cut, the state will wither and die. How can it be regarded as proper if government officials do not devise ways and means of protecting the people but indulge in building villas in the countryside for selfish purposes, while receiving large emoluments and occupying high official positions? We are simply weak subjects scattered in the countryside. But we take our food from the sovereign’s land and are clothed with garments provided by the sovereign. Therefore, we cannot sit idle when the state is in danger. People of the eight provinces are of one mind in raising the banner of righteousness now. We want to support the state and make the people’s life secure. We have made a firm pledge of life and death to this end.

⁵³ “Ch’wiŏ,” [Collection of statements] *Tonghangnan kirok 1* [Records of the Tonghak War 1], (Seoul: Kuksa p’yŏnch’an wiwŏnhoe, 1959), 109.

When these texts are compared, the people are redefined from being “ignorant people” to being “the root of the state,” and from beings with “insignificant loyalty” to persons who can take the initiative in “supporting the state and make the people’s life secure.” The expression that reads: “the people are the root of the state” can be seen in almost all the statements that the armed peasants made to justify their actions after the release of the “Manifesto.” In contrast to this, the government officials, who had been described as noblemen with a strong patriotic spirit, changed into morally inferior beings who were only greedy for government posts. In the “Manifesto,” ministers, local governors and magistrates are described as disrupting order by failing to govern with benevolence, the foundation of politics, because of their obsessive self-interest, not as possessing the moral superiority with which one can uphold principles. This is different from the popular protests before the Tonghak uprising, when the people only demanded the expulsion of corrupt local officials. It may be regarded as the peasant army’s declaration that the justification of the governing class for their right to govern as based on a combination of moral qualities and inherited status had lost its validity. In addition, the armed peasants’ determination to restore the ideology of *minbon* and *injŏng* with their own strength reflects that they considered that they themselves should take the lead in punishing corrupt officials and correcting political problems; and that they, therefore, no longer accepted being regarded as morally inferior. The change in the awareness of the peasant army that redefined the “minister-commoner relationship” suggested a change in the political order.

The peasant army had internalized and appropriated the ideology of *minbon* and *injŏng*, even though it had initially been proposed by the governing class, and utilized it to justify their demands: the restoration of *injŏng*. This allowed them to ask why those rapacious governors and magistrates who governed so cruelly should not be called traitors.⁵⁴ They could also argue that it was justifiable to “drive those greedy officials out one by one” as “the court did not listen [to the complaints of the people] in spite of misgovernment” so that “the people could no longer endure their suffering.”⁵⁵ Chŏn Pongjun said that he and his armed peasants used violence only to “get rid of the abuses, for the sake of the people,” and the ultimate target of his actions were the members of the Min clan, who at the time wielded huge power as royal in-laws and were judged to be guilty of

⁵⁴ *Chuban Ilbon kongsagwan kirok 1* [Records of the Japanese Legation in Korea 1] (Seoul: Kuksa p’yŏnch’an wiwŏnhoe, 1986), 14.

⁵⁵ “Yangho ch’ot’o tŭngnok,” [Collection of reports on the situation of the Tonghak Peasant War] *Tonghak nongmin chŏnjaeng saryo ch’ongsŏ 6* [Collection of historical documents on the Tonghak Peasant War 6] (Seoul: Saun yŏn’guso, 1996), 66–67.

misgovernment and corruption.⁵⁶ This suggests that the armed peasants were keenly aware that they were the king's subjects (*wangmin* 王民), and that therefore it was only natural for them to be governed with benevolence, while as the king's subjects they could help the king and the nation emerge from the crisis, acting on the king's behalf. In other words, they might take the matter into their own hands and get rid of corrupt officials in the name of the king.

With such awareness and behavior the peasant army distinguished itself radically from the elite Confucian scholars. As seen in the "Letter of Patriotic Exhortation" of the righteous army (*ũibyŏng*) in 1896, the traditional *yangban* raised a movement with the objective of resisting and repelling the Japanese who had committed the outrage of killing the Queen Consort of Chosŏn. However, before they were able to take concrete actions to repel the Japanese, they dissolved as soon as the king ordered them to do so.⁵⁷ In contrast, the people continued their "rebellion," ignoring the decree by the king for their dissolution, in spite of the fact that they had internalized Confucian ideas. As mentioned earlier, this was because the restoration of *injŏng* was needed to save the people, who were the root of the nation, in a situation where the court could not listen to the protests of the people in spite of the misgovernment of greedy officials, so that the very existence of the people was threatened. Thus they put the principle of *minbon* first and found that they could not obey the king's command for the time being, even though they used his authority to legitimize their getting rid of corrupt officials. In this way the peasant army was quite different from the traditional Confucian scholars who regarded the subject's loyalty to the king as the supreme justification for action.

⁵⁶ "Chŏn Pongjun kongch'o," [Original testimony of Chŏn Pongjun] *Tonghak sasang charyojip 1* [Collection of Tonghak thought 1] (Seoul: Asea munhwasa, 1979), 327–328.

⁵⁷ Invading the palace in October 1895, a party of Japanese assassins had killed the Queen Consort, and then an ordinance prohibiting topknots was issued by the reformists who were sponsored by Japan. Confucian scholars found short hair unacceptable as "the beginning of filial piety is not damaging one's body and hair because they were given by one's parents." Thus, in order to express objection to the decree, Ch'oe Ikhyŏn who was an influential Confucian scholar at that time took an ax, went to the royal palace gate and appealed to the king to have him beheaded rather than insisting on making him cut his hair. Cf. Hong Sungwŏn, "Ŭlmi ũibyŏng undong ŭl chaep'yŏnghanda" [A revaluation of the *ũibyŏng* movement of the year *ũlmi*], *Yŏksa pip'yŏng* 29 (1995), 165–178, and Pae Hangsŏp, "1896-nyŏn Naju hyangnich'ŭng ũi ũibyŏng chudo wa kŭ paegyŏng" [On the raising of Righteous Armies by local functionaries in Naju in 1896], *Taedong munhwa yŏn'gu* 51 (2005), 183–229. These two incidents gave rise to the righteous army movement of traditional Confucian scholars throughout the nation.

In this context, it is problematic to view the loyalty to the king that the peasant army professed as based on “fantasies about the king.”⁵⁸ Their loyalty to the king was not simply a manifestation of nostalgia for a past that had never been. The king was the basis for the justification of the actions by the peasant army as seen from the phrase “we take our food from the sovereign’s land and are clothed with garments provided by the sovereign.” “Therefore, we cannot sit idle when the state is in danger,” is an expression of the concept that the people are the king’s subjects and living in the king’s domain.⁵⁹ The fact that the nation was in imminent danger prompted the armed peasants to take the initiative in restoring *injŏng*, which the governing class no longer could maintain. Both the internalization of Confucianism and the existence of the king as the holder of the highest authority in the Chosŏn dynasty enabled the people, who had thought of themselves as the passive object of governance, to redefine themselves as the agents of political action.

However, the status of the king was gradually weakening in the actions and thoughts of the peasant army. These changes were brought about not only by domestic factors—the struggle to survive due to the abandonment of *injŏng*, and the spread and internalization of Confucianism—but also by the influence of Western thought, which started to spread around the country from the second half of the nineteenth century. For instance, when Tonghak followers were ordered to disband by government officials sent from the capital during the movement for the posthumous exoneration of the Tonghak founder in March of 1893, they argued with the officials, stating that their gathering was similar to the people’s assemblies in foreign countries, in that they gathered and discussed any laws passed by the government that were unfavorable to the people.⁶⁰ This suggests that the people were willing to accept the parliamentary system of the West, or at least were influenced by it.⁶¹

⁵⁸ According to Cho Kyŏngdal, although the peasant army radically advocated the ideology of the people as the foundation of the nation, they were incapable of conducting a struggle to request that they be allowed to participate in day-to-day politics, and this was due to a “fantasy” about the king. (Cho Kyŏngdal, *Itan no minshū hanran* [Popular revolts of heterodox religious groups] (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1998), 246.)

⁵⁹ In France, too, peasants and city dwellers during the seventeenth century appealed to custom to legitimize rebellion, and rebellions were carried out in the name of the king, to attack those government officials who deceived the king and failed to assist him properly; the actions of the people were justified by appealing to uncoded rights guaranteed by the king. (Roger Chartier, *Les origines culturelles de la Révolution française* (Seuil, 2000), 203–204).

⁶⁰ “Ch’wiŏ,” [Collection of statements] *Tonghangnan kirok 1* [Records of the Tonghak War, Book 1] (Seoul: Kuksa p’yŏnch’an wiwŏnhoe, 1959), 122–123.

⁶¹ According to Confucianism, politics is the process of realizing in this world the (cosmic) “principle” (*i*, 理), which is impartial, not favoring anyone in particular, for the benefit of the

The weakening authority of the king can also be observed from the peasant army's continual demand for the regency of the Taewŏn'gun, the father of the king, from approximately one month after the outbreak of the uprising. The statement below made by Chŏn Pongjun when he was arrested in December 1894 after he had fled into the mountains near his hometown also points toward a change in outlook. It presents a picture of what his concept of a new political order looked like.

After achieving our aim to expel the Japanese army and drive out corrupt officials from the central government, we intended to let some honest and noble scholars manage the government. And, we wanted to return to our homes to engage in farming. We knew it would be precarious to grant power to only one person, so we thought it would be desirable to let some respected figures govern the country, consulting with each other according to a kind of consensus system.⁶²

The political system that Chŏn Pongjun envisaged was based on an awareness that a one-man leadership would lead to abuses, and entailed a kind of joint decision-making government in which prominent figures described as “honest and noble scholars” would manage the government in mutual cooperation on the basis of consensus. His concept of the enforcement of ordinances by consensus can be considered to be the outcome of experience accumulated in the course of presenting petitions, and of information gleaned about the Western political system—the parliamentary system.

The concept of letting some respected scholars operate the government by mutual consensus does not mean a complete denial of kingship. However, it inevitably led to the weakening of the authority of the king, just like the argument that the Taewŏn'gun had to act as regent in order to overcome the national crisis. This suggests that there was an increasing awareness among the armed peasants,

people. “Principle” therefore has the characteristic of being something “public” (*kong*, 公), in the sense that it stands for what is shared by all and is also what allows the co-existence of all the people. In contrast, something “private” (*sa*, 私) stands for what the people cannot share and what does not allow the co-existence of all the people, such as greed and self-interest. In this ideological tradition, the parliamentary system of the West or republicanism could unexpectedly win sympathy or respect. (Watanabe Hiroshi, *Tōjia no ōken to shisō* [Royal authority and thought in East Asia] (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1997), 204–205.) The peasants of the Chosŏn period held group meetings as a village to discuss issues at hand when protests happened during the Tonghak peasant uprising, and they called this a “people’s assembly” (*minhoe*, 民會).

⁶² *Osaka Asahi Shinbun*, [The Osaka Asahi newspaper] Meiji 28 (1895), March 6, in *Tonghak nongmin chŏnjaeng saryo ch'ongsŏ* 23 [Collection of historical documents on the Tonghak Peasant War 23] (Seoul: Saun yŏn'guso, 1996), 171.

who ardently hoped for the realization of the ideology of *minbon* and *injŏng* and risked their lives by joining the “rebellion,” that the authority of the king, whose political power had been regarded as absolute in Chosŏn, might be weakened in order to achieve their aims.

V. CONCLUSION

In the Tonghak peasant uprising, the people took the initiative to save the country when the livelihood of the people, the root of the state, was endangered and the nation in crisis because of the corruption and extortions of officials who had abandoned the *minbon* and *injŏng* ideology that the ruling class itself had propagated. As shown in the “Manifesto,” the armed peasants had internalized and appropriated Confucianism to justify their actions, and wanted to restore the Confucian ideology of *minbon* and *injŏng* that had been abandoned by government officials. The Tonghak peasant army did not fundamentally deny or try to overthrow the governing system of the Chosŏn dynasty, nor did they reject the institution of kingship. This is closely related to the political culture of Chosŏn, which was much more strongly influenced by Confucianism than in China. In this regard, the political awareness the armed peasants showed was far from modern; they were still influenced by the existing Confucian political culture of benevolent governance.

However, as Hobsbawm pointed out: “Revolutions may be made de facto by peasants who do not deny the legitimacy of the existing power structure, law, the state and even the landlords.”⁶³ Of course, the Tonghak peasant army did not go as far as to create such a revolutionary situation. Rather, the armed peasants relativized the role of the king as the uprising progressed, and developed an awareness that opened avenues toward a new political order. This awareness, which had been formed by means of the internalization and appropriation of the governing ideology, implied that the armed peasants needed to restore benevolent government with their own strength, and put institutional strategies for the restoration of *injŏng* above obedience to what were ostensibly the king’s orders. This inevitably caused the authority of the king to weaken. Despite the fact that the governing class used Confucianism with the hope of ruling the people more efficiently, the spread of Confucianism and the internalization of it by the people rather brought about a massive rebellion, wreaking havoc from the inside on the Confucian political order, according to which the king had the highest authority.

The claim the Tonghak believers made during the movement for the posthumous exoneration of the Tonghak founder, that their gatherings were like

⁶³ Eric Hobsbawm, “Peasants and Politics,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 1 (1973), 12.

the West's "people's assemblies," is evidence that such changes were also influenced by a new kind of political ideology and system introduced from the West, even if this influence was not strong enough to drive out the older hegemonic ideology. As mentioned earlier, popular movements, popular consciousness and popular culture are not fixed or static, and George Rudé's understanding of them as dynamic, with bi-directional influences of both local and foreign factors resulting in the creation of their own identity through a continuous process of coming to terms with the foreign elements, may also be applied to the Tonghak peasants' uprising.⁶⁴

There are still other implications of the armed peasants' wider self-awareness. The fact that they not only demanded the dismissal of the clerks at the lowest level of local government, and of local officials, but also of high officials of the central government; that they frequently referred to expressions that suggest a concept of the nation, such as "the people united under one king" (*irwangjimin*, 一王之民) and the "eight provinces" (*p'alto*, 八道); and that the invasion of the Japanese armies rekindled the memory of national historical events such as the Japanese invasion of Korea in 1592, shows that the people were gradually realizing that, as members of a national community, they might participate in politics. The door had been opened to their eventually becoming "citizens."

As is well-known, after Japan's colonization of Korea in 1910, Confucian culture in the form of memorial services for ancestors, particular forms of adoption and inheritance, and the striving for a rise in social status, increased rather than decreased in influence. However, less than ten years after colonization by Japan, from the moment the March 1st Movement occurred in 1919, the independence front gave up the idea of restoring the Confucian governing system with the king as its highest authority, and a republican government in exile was formed. This seems related to the fact that the experience of the Tonghak peasant uprising had contributed to the weakening of the political status of the king.

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⁶⁴ George Rudé, *Ideology and Popular Protest* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 28–29.

APPENDIX

Manifesto

Man is the most precious being in the world because he has morality (*illyun*, 人倫). The proper relationship between ruler and subject as well as between father and son constitutes the fundamental fabric of human morality. If the ruler is benign and the subject loyal and upright, and the father affectionate and the son filial, then family and state can be properly established and enjoy boundless felicity. Now, our Sovereign is benign, filial, kind and loving; he is sagacious and wise. Therefore, if He is assisted by wise and honest ministers, the harmony of Yao and Shun, or the golden age of the Han Emperors Wen and Ching shall be easily achieved within the predictable future. However, today's ministers of state merely appropriate emoluments and occupy official positions without giving any thought to serving the country. They label the scholars who remonstrate with the King in loyal sincerity as wicked talkers; they call the honest-minded people a vicious faction. Inside the court, there are no qualified ministers to assist the Sovereign; in the provinces there are numerous officials who harass the people. Consequently, the people feel increasingly alienated from the government. At home, the people find no occupation to make their livelihood secure; outside, they have no means to protect their bodies. The abuses of the government grow day by day, and mournful voices are raised against it ceaselessly. The proper relationship between ruler and subject, the proper bond between father and son, and the proper distinction between noble and plebeian, all these are completely destroyed and nothing is left to salvage. Kuan-tzu once said that the state cannot stand if the four social bonds (*sayu*, 四維) are not firmly maintained. In this regard, today's situation is worse than it was at the time of Kuan-tzu. [Specifically,] none of the high ranking nobles and officials (*konggyōng*, 公卿) in the central government, along with the local governors and magistrates, mind the precipitous situation of the state. Instead, they merely seek to fatten themselves and enrich their families. They use the institution of recruitment as a means of making money: the examination hall is turned into a market place for monetary exchange. Great sums of government tax fill private coffers instead of the royal treasury. The state has accumulated massive [foreign] debts, but nobody worries about their repayment. On the contrary, the government leaders indulge in frivolous luxury and licentious pastimes, without any sense of inhibition. Their greed has brought the entire country to a crisis and left the people with nothing but misery. Everybody in the country is reduced to this abject plight—all because of the covetous exploitation of magistrates and ministers. How could the people be other than poor and distressed? The people are the root of the state. If the root is cut, the state will

wither and die. How can it be regarded as proper if government officials do not devise ways and means of protecting the people but indulge in building villas in the countryside for selfish purposes, while receiving large emoluments and occupying high official positions? We are simply weak subjects scattered in the countryside. But we take our food from the Sovereign's land and are clothed in the Sovereign's garments. Therefore, we cannot sit idle when the state is in danger. People of the eight provinces are of one mind in raising the banner of righteousness now. We want to support the state and make the people's life secure. We have made a firm pledge of life and death to this end. Today's event might shock you, but do not by any means be afraid. Everybody may safely pursue his own occupation. Together let us celebrate a new age of peace and prosperity. Let us all bless a new order of holy harmony permeated by the holy virtue of the Sovereign. We shall be grateful more than a million times [for your cooperation].⁶⁵



⁶⁵ “Surok,” [Followed and recorded] *Tonghak nongmin chōnjaeng saryo ch’ongsō 5* [Collection of historical documents on the Tonghak Peasant War 5] (Seoul: Saun yōn’guso, 1996), 157–159. The translation is cited, with minor changes, from Young Ick Lew (1990), 168–169. For another translation of this document, refer to G. Kallander, “Chōn Pongjun’s 1894 Tonghak Declaration.” In: ed. Jahyun Haboush, *Epistolary Korea: Letters in the Communicative Space of the Chosōn, 1392–1910* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 154–156.

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