



CHONDOIST RELIGION IN NORTH KOREA: SELECTED ASPECTS

RELIGIA CZONDOISTYCZNA W KOREI PÓŁNOCNEJ –
WYBRANE ASPEKTY

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— ABSTRACT —

Chondoism is a 20th-century Korean pantheistic religion, based on the 19th-century Tonghak movement. Originally, Chondoism was recognized as the national religion of Korea, unlike Buddhism and Christianity. Being a patriotic movement, Chondoism was able to develop itself in North Korea when North Korea was liberated from the Japanese occupation (1910–1945). Despite the nature of the North Korean regime, Chondoism is still present in the North Korean society. Like other religious groups in North Korea, the Chondoist religion today serves political aims in this country as the Chondoist Chongu Party belongs to the Democratic Front for the Reunification of Korea. On the other side, its influence cannot be neglected when understanding the society of North Korea.

Keywords: Chondoism; Chondoist Chongu Party; Kim Il Sung; Kim Jong Il; Tonghak movement

— ABSTRAKT —

Czondoizm to dwudziestowieczna koreańska religia panteistyczna, oparta na dziewiętnastowiecznym ruchu Tonghak. Pierwotnie czondoizm był uznawany za religię narodową Korei, w odróżnieniu od buddyzmu i chrześcijaństwa. Będąc ruchem patriotycznym, Czondoizm mógł się rozwinąć w Korei Północnej, kiedy ta została wyzwolona spod okupacji japońskiej (1910–1945). Pomimo charakteru reżimu północnokoreańskiego czondoizm jest nadal obecny w społeczeństwie Korei Północnej. Podobnie jak inne grupy religijne w Korei Północnej, dzisiejsza religia czondoistyczna służy celom politycznym w tym kraju, ponieważ Czondoistyczna Partia Czongu należy do Demokratycznego Frontu na rzecz Zjednoczenia Ojczyzny. Trudno też nie docenić wpływu czondoizmu na społeczeństwo Korei Północnej.

Słowa kluczowe: czondoizm; Czondoistyczna Partia Czongu; Kim Ir Sen; Kim Jong Il; ruch Tonghak

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the paper is to prove that Chondoist movement switched from a religious to a political movement in North Korea. To demonstrate what preceded this process, the paper was divided into four substantive chapters. Chapter one consists of an introduction to the Chondoism. Chapter two is focused on religious affairs and the place of Chondoism in North Korea. Chapter three explains the history of the Chondoism movement after 1945. Chapter four is focused on Chondoism in inter-Korean relations.

BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO CHONDOISM

The literature related to Chondoism is very rich (Ogarek-Czój, 1984; Malinowski, 2003). However for clarification purposes, we will do a short presentation related to Chondoism. Before the division of the Korean Peninsula, the Northern part was more religious than the South. Christianity was the most active among organized religions. Pyongyang was even called the ‘Jerusalem of the East’. Just before the liberation of the Korean Peninsula in 1945, Korea was an extremely vibrant religious country where the worldviews of Shamanism, Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity intertwined and competed.

The effect of those meeting of ideas was especially vivid in Korean new religious movements, many of which already emerged at the turn of the 20th century, especially the church of the Chondo (this term may be translated as the “Religion of the Heavenly Way”). This religion, which unified elements of Buddhism, Christianity, and Confucianism, was especially active in both the religious and political spheres during the Japanese colonial period between 1910 and 1945. However, after the end of the Korean War, this religion has faced severe persecution, and became “a shadow of its former self” (Levi & Husarski, 2021, p. 82).

Chondoism is a Korean religious movement, based on the 19th-century Tonghak movement founded by Choe Je-u (1824–1864). This scholar conceptualized the Tonghak ideology in the 1850s and 1860s to improve the lot of poor and exploited farmers and restore political and social stability. His ideas were quickly accepted by the peasantry. He put his thoughts to music so that illiterate peasants could understand and accept them more easily. His teachings were streamlined and packaged into a message of salvation for farmers in distress. The

rice-growing regions regularly suffered drought and floods, causing great famine. Due to farmers revolts, the government urgently reformed the army and the grain distribution systems to try to suppress the abuses even if the system did not change fundamentally. Chondoism is also related to the peasant rebellions which took place between 1894 and 1895 (January 10, 1894–March 29, 1895) and to the protection of marginal people (*minjung*). The Tonghak (translated as the “Lessons from the East”) movement, condemned to operate clandestinely, has been at the origin of the peasant rebellions of national and anti-feudal inspiration. It was refounded in 1905 under the name of the Church of the Chondo. Chondoism has become increasingly popular in South Korea with the return of nationalism at the beginning of the 20th century, and particularly because Chondoism teaches that God (*Haneullim*) resides in every person. The four goals of Chondoism are defined as follow: to support the nation and the people, to spread the truth in the world, to deliver humanity from suffering, and to build a paradise on earth. Chondoism and the ideology of the Tonghak, related to the notion of patience as its guiding ideology, inherits the tradition of patriotism and national unity achieved by its predecessors in the Peasant War, the March 1st Movement, and the anti-Japanese crusade for national liberation.

RELIGIONS AND CHONDOISM IN NORTH KOREA

Despite the content of the North Korean Constitution of 1948, which stated that “Citizens of the DPRK have freedom of religious belief and of conducting religious services” (Lankov, 2015, p. 6), the period of the Soviet occupation and formative years of the new political system in the northern part of the Korean Peninsula were disastrous for the traditional religious life. In 1972, two important elements contributed to give a new impact to religious organizations in North Korea. Firstly, the new North Korean Constitution of 1972 elaborated a longer definition of freedom of religious belief than the previous Constitution of 1948. Citizens have freedom of religious belief. This right is granted through the approval of the construction of religious buildings and the holding of religious ceremonies. Religion must not be used as a pretext for drawing in foreign forces or for harming the State or social order (*Constitution of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea*, Art. 68).

Being a patriotic movement, Chondoism was able to develop itself in North Korea when North Korea was liberated from the Japanese. A survey which was

made on the northern side of the peninsula underlined that there are 1.5 million people practicing Chondoism, 375,000 Buddhists, 200,000 Protestants, and 57,000 Catholics (Oh & Hassig, 2004, p. 182).

According to the Human Rights Organization's "Database Center for North Korean Human Rights", the government of the Republic of Korea estimated that as of 2018, there were one hundred twenty-one religious' facilities in the North Korea, including sixty Buddhist temples, fifty-two Chondoist temples, three Protestant churches, and one Russian Orthodox church, all mostly under state control. There were 5,190,092 Chondoists (10.1% of the population) in South Korea in 2009 and 2.8 million in North Korea (in 2000, 12.9% of the population). There are two Chondoist churches in Pyongyang. One of them was built in Pyongyang in 1990 (Hoare & Pares, 2005, p. 88). Each of them may gather one hundred people during festivities. These churches in Pyongyang consists of anonymous buildings with a main room of meetings. There are no decorations from outside which may indicate that we are dealing with a religious infrastructure. Fifty additional temples are dispatched around North Korea and there are also eight hundred Chondoist places of prayers (*Bukanui cheondogyoneun eotteon dancheinga?*, 2019) where 10 to 20 believers may gather. The worship is named Silver Time (*Silbeogangjwa*). Each of these facilities are regularly used by the population. Meetings are hold on Sundays. However, foreigners, including Chinese people from the mainland, do not have access to these religious facilities.

CHONDOISM IN NORTH KOREA AFTER THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION

At the time of the liberation of the Korean Peninsula in 1945, Chondoism was the largest religious force in North Korea with 2.8 million members and maintained considerable cooperation with the early ruling powers of North Korea.

The Chondoist Chongu Party participated in the establishment of North Korea's regime and social reform. During the transitional period, Kim Il Sung wanted to create a united front organization which contained the representatives of every progressive force including some, properly controlled, representatives of various religions.

The Chondoist Chongu Party activists, who were in a reclusive state, began to restore organizations in each region immediately after liberation. According to

the report of the Soviet garrison, local party organizations were formed in North Korea until October 1945 (Malinowski, 2003, p. 80).

On October 31, 1945, the Congress of the Chondoist Chongu was held in the presence of representatives of the local party organizations. The congress was closed after unanimous approval of the promotion of national reunification, relief of war survivors, measures against unemployment, and publication of a newspaper. During this congress it has been decided to create a North Korean branch of the Chondoist Chongu Party. On February 8, 1946, the North Korean Chondoist Chongu Party was officially founded (*Korea Tour*, 1997, p. 15). The Chondoist Chongu Party originally represented the followers of the Religion of the Heavenly Way, which combines the teachings of 19th-century Korean neo-Confucian peasant movements with some Shamanistic elements (Salát, 2019, p. 112).

The supreme leadership organ of the Chondoist Chongu Party is the Party Congress, and below the Party Congress is the Party Central Committee, which is elected by the Party Congress. The Chondoist Chongu Party Congress is convened by the Party Central Committee once every four years. The Party Central Committee is required to convene a plenary session at least once every six months. Although there is a Central Guidance Committee in Pyongyang and there are local organizations in each city and province, there has been no official report on the activities of the local organizations (Kim Pyong Ro, 2013, p. 100).

According to Andrei Lankov, the Chondoist Chongu Party was always a branch of the Workers' Party of Korea (Lankov, 2022). Joseph Bermudez considers also that the sixth division of the Unification Front Department is supervising religious organizations in North Korea, including North Korean Christians organizations and the Chondoist Chongu Party (Bermudez, 2015, p. 1820).

The Central Committee of the North Korea Branch of the Chondoist Chongu Party was composed of 13 members under the leadership of Kim Jong Ju. This branch of the Chondoist Chongu Party gathered 52,959 members. With the establishment of North Korea on September 9, 1948, the Chondoist Chongu Party expanded to 289,494 members. Eighty percent of the Chondoist Chongu Party members were of peasant origin. In addition, seven percent were workers and three percent were clerks, with workers and peasants accounting for ninety percent of the total, with merchants, entrepreneurs, craftsmen, and students partially participating. The Christian communities were mainly based in cities,

on the other hand, members of the Chondoist Chongu Party were coming from rural areas.

The initial mission of the party was defending the country and ensuring the security of the people and above all “expelling the Westerners and the Japanese”. This meant opposing all aggression and all enslavement and wanting to promote national sovereignty and the building of a democratic, rich, and powerful state. It must be added that the patriotism of Chondoist prevent from any foreign intervention in internal affairs of Korea. The patriotic Chondoism wave was a movement which was opposed to Catholic missionaries who praised western values (Becker, 2006, p. 79). That is why the Unification of Korea was the primary and natural mission for the spread of Chondoism all over the Korean Peninsula.

The party, which is one of the three legal political parties in the DPRK, and its representatives take part in the work of Supreme People’s Congress, which is the North Korean legislature. Based on the tradition, the Chondoist community has participated in political activities for the construction of their own national family in the process of construction of the country since the liberation of the Korean Peninsula in August 1945.

In the first chapter of this paper, we briefly mentioned the four principles of the Chondoist religion. The Chondoist Chongu Party also adopted four principles which were much more dealing with the ideology of Kim Il Sung. These principles are as below:

1. Establishment of an ideal democratic state with national independence.
2. Committed to establishing a new ethics in line with the spirit of the Heaven.
3. Aiming for realization of a new economic system in line with the new life ideology of the Unification.
4. Ensuring the thoroughness of the country.

From a theoretical point of view, the framework of the Chondoist Chongu Party is more balanced than that of the Workers’ Party of Korea. In its basic purpose, the Chondoist Chongu Party shows a more balanced attitude, criticizing both the American-style capitalist dictatorship and the Soviet-style proletarian dictatorship, and guaranteeing freedom and equality for all the people of the Korean Peninsula. The Chondoist Chongu Party was organized in the direction toward a new democracy. However, the balance was closer to socialism. The Chondoist Chongu Party had a fundamentally negative perception of capitalism and liberal democracy, and only adopted a method of overcoming them by suggesting a Korean condition that did not require the Soviet-style class dictatorship.

Members of the Chondoist Chongu Party participated in the land reform. This reform confiscated, among other, lands belonging to Buddhists and discredited their position in North Korea. The land reform also accentuated differences between Buddhists and Chondoists.

In 1947, the members of the Chondoist Chongu Party also fell into serious conflict with the Communist Party of Korea as many of the Chondoists were arrested in the case of the March 1st Reenactment Movement in 1948 (*Bukjo-seoncheondogyocheongudang*, 2022).

To understand fully the March 1st Reenactment Movement of 1948, we do have to come back in the history of the Korean Peninsula. After the conference of Moscow which took place in December 1945, the US-Soviet joint committee held two meetings on the issue of establishing a provisional government for reunification in Korea from 1946 till 1947. However, it eventually broke down and when the General Assembly of the United Nations passed the “Establishment of a Unification Government by Free General Election in North and South Korea” in 1947, the northern side of the Korean Peninsula was opposed. In South Korea, North Korea’s rejection of this free general election promoted the establishment of an independent government.

As a result, some members of Chondoist organizations, who were considered orthodox nationalists of the Korean Peninsula, launched a unification movement. Unfortunately, the role of the Chondoist Chongu Party was extremely limited in the liberation government, where only strong foreign powers and foreign followers with this background prevailed and took the lead. For this reason, this movement, which was supposed to prevent the division between North and South Korea, failed to some extent. The movement was supposed to be done in the spirit of the March 1st Movement (also known as the Sam-Il movement) which took place in 1919. Meanwhile, people affiliated to the Tonghak movement registered themselves under the Chondoism (Becker, 2006, p. 79). Thirty three Korean activists who formed the core of the Samil Movement met in Seoul and urged Hasegawa Yoshimichi, the Japanese governor of the Korean Peninsula, to recognize the independence of Korea. This marshal of the Japanese Army ordered the massacre of thousands of Koreans by the Japanese police force and army in 1919.

Discussions between representatives of the Chondoist parties of both Koreas were held in 1948. Among the two emissaries, Park Hyeon Hwa arrived in Pyongyang on February 14, 1948, and delivered a secret letter to Kim Il Dae (then chairman of the Chondoist Chongu Party of the Province of Pyongnam) and

then to Kim Deok Rin (head of an association gathering Chondoist believers). Leaders of Chondoist organizations met at the Chondoist temple of Gangdong. Chondoists were fierce nationalists and those who were less loyal to Chondoist ideas were expelled from the Chondoist Chongu Party. Internal division in the Chondoist Chongu party led to the imprisonment of 17,000 cadre-level clergy. Some of them were even executed. This movement was not successful, it had nevertheless a great significance as a reunification movement as two million of North Korean demonstrated in the streets of their country for the quest of a peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula.

Kim Il Sung was probably afraid of losing his power in North Korea and could not accept the growing position of Chondoists. In agreement with Soviet advisors, he probably decided to blow the Chondoist movement which appealed for the unification of the country. Kim Il Sung was not against the unification of the Korean peninsula, however, he wanted that this process would be realized in his own style, i.e., under communist rules. Kim Il Sung also had a certain sensitivity toward Chondoism as demonstrated below.

Choi Dong Oh (1892–1963) was an independence activist affiliated to Chondoist ideas. During the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945), Choi Dong Oh established Hwaseong Uisuk, a national educational institution in Manchuria. When young Kim Il Sung was studying there, Choi Dong Oh was the principal. For this reason, Choi Dong Oh was treated as the “teacher of Kim Il Sung” in North Korea. The biography of Kim Il Sung is also evocating the great attachment of Kim Il Sung to the Tonghak movement (Kim Il Sung, 1992).

CHONDOISM IN INTER-KOREAN RELATIONS

Chondoists disappeared in the 1950^s and 1960^s when the North Korean government sought to eliminate any kind of opposition in all religions. However, like other religions, Chondoism reemerged in the 1970^s as an affiliated organization of the Workers’ Party of Korea. A statement in the name of the Central Committee of the Chosun Chondo Church was announced as an offensive against South Korea, and activities of organizations affiliated to Chondoism were resumed, but it not under the scope of religious affairs.

As inter-Korean dialogue began in the 1970s, Chondoism, like other religious groups, established the Chondo Church Central Guidance Committee on February 15, 1974, in accordance with the propaganda of religious freedom and the

need to form a front for reunification with South Korea. On April 5, 1986, the first commemoration ceremony for the founding of the Central Guidance Committee of the Chondo Church was held, and the ceremony is held every year on April 5. On May 30, 1989, the Central Guidance Committee of the Chondo Church played a leading role in the formation of the Chosun Religious Union Council (Kim Pyong Ro, 2013, p. 125). The first contact between North and South Chondoist clergy was made at the 4th Asian Conference on Religion and Peace General Assembly held in Kathmandu, Nepal, from October 27 to November 2, 1991. As North Korea dispatched a delegation to join this event, Shin Jung Hyeok (then chairman of the Central Guidance Committee of the Chondo Church), the head of the Chosun Religious Association, participated as the head of the delegation and met Im Woon Gil (then head of the South Korean Chondo Church) (Yun Jang Won, 2021).

In August 1997, the North-South exchanges of the Chondo Church stagnated due to the North Korean incident of Oh Ik Je, who served as the ordinance of the Chondo Church in South Korea from 1989 to 1994. Oh Ik Je was a South Korean Chondoist who defected to North Korea in August 1997. In August 1999, an inter-Korean Chondo Church representative meeting was held in Beijing at the request of the North. At that time, three middle-level clergymen of the Chondoist church were invited to visit North Korea at the invitation of the North, but the South Korean government withheld the approval due to concerns about the possibility of political use by North Korea, which did not take effect. Afterwards, Choi In-guk, the second son of the previously mentioned Choi Deok Sin and Ryu Mi Young, defected to North Korea on July 6, 2019.

In June 2001, North Korea announced that the number of the Chondo Church members was 13,500, and the number of members of the Cheongwoo Party was 14,000. In December 1993, the Chondoist Chongu Party revised its code and allowed non-Chondoists to join the party (2016 북한이 해: 2016).

The frequent visits to North Korea by overseas Korean religious believers, which began in the 1980s, had a significant impact on these changes. During this time, North Korea focused on the united front strategy by actively inviting Korean religious people and holding meetings with religious people and holding anti-Korean religious gatherings abroad. Religious activities in their own way were resumed in 1986 by holding the ceremony named Cheon Il Jeol, commemorating the anniversary of the founding of Chondoism, and this commemoration ceremony continued till 2019. Between 1986 and 2015, there were 10 ceremonies commemorating Cheon Il Jeol. Also, after 2019, ceremonies

were probably cancelled due the expansion of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Korean Peninsula. In December 1994, the Tangun Ceremony was held at the tomb of Tangun. The tomb of Tangun was visited by representatives of Chondoist organizations of both Koreas in 2001. Meanwhile, North Korea's religious policy changed completely at the turning point in 1988. Around this period, important religions such as Protestantism, Catholicism, and Buddhism experienced significant changes. By constructing Bongsu Church and Changchung Cathedral in Pyongyang in 1988, it was shown that there was a Christian Church in North Korea. In 1989, the Catholic Church established its own organization, the Chosun Catholic Association (then Chosun Catholics Association), which was distinct from the Joseon Christian Federation, and held its first worship service at the newly built Changchung Cathedral in Pyongyang. In 1992, another new church, Chilgol Church, was built. In the Buddhist community, the Joseon Buddhist Federation officially joined the 15th World Buddhist Friendship Council (WFB) in 1986, and in 1988, for the first time, commemoration of important festivals such as the Buddha's birthday began to be held publicly. Since October 1988, when Bongsu Church and Changchung Cathedral were built in Pyongyang, the Coal Festival commemoration ceremony was held, and Cheonanjeol, the founding day of Chondoism (Kim Pyong Ro, 2013, pp. 26–27).

South Korean critics considered that North Korea allows Chondoists to practice so it can maintain contacts with the tens of thousands of practicing Chondoists in South Korea and place spies within their organizations. A few prominent South Korean Chondoists have defected to the North in the past two decades, where they became anti-South spokespeople (Malinowski, 2003, p. 80). The Chondoist Chongu Party was led by South Korean intellectuals and politicians who have migrated to North Korea. Two of them were Choi Deok Sin (1914–1989) and his wife Ryu Mi Young (1921–2016). Choi Deok Sin served as a foreign minister in South Korea, but after being sacked in the 1970s, he voluntarily fled to Pyongyang in hopes of a better recognition. Being in North Korea, he served, among other, as the chairman of the Chondoist Chongu Party and chairman of the Association of Religious People of Korea. He died while working as a propaganda worker for some time, and North Korea buried him in the tomb of the patriotic martyr Shin Miri. After the death of Choi Deok Sin, his wife Ryu Mi Young remained highly linked head of the Chondoist Chongu Party. Ryu Mi Young became an advisor to the leadership of this party in March 1993. In January 1994, she was nominated as the head of the Chondoist Chongu Party, a position she held until her death. Andrei Lankov considers that the influence of

this party is meaningful. This is because in South Korea, Chondoism is perceived by most people as an old group in history textbooks rather than as a religion.

CONCLUSION

The paper demonstrated that the Chondoism movement switched from a religious to a political movement in North Korea. Chondoism is the most successfully adapted religion within the North Korean social system. Among the 273 members of the Funeral Committee formed after Kim Il Sung's death in July 1994, Yuri Myung, the chairman of the Chondoist Chongu Party, is so influential that he ranks 35th. In addition, it is said that there are 22 members of the Chondoist Chongu Party elected as delegates of the Supreme People's Assembly, and there are about 300 delegates in the local councils. In addition, it is the Central Committee of the Chosun Chondoism that leads the Council of Religious People of Korea in which all religious groups in North Korea participate.

Like other religious groups in North Korea, the Chondoist religion serves a political purpose in the country today. On the other side, its influence cannot be neglected when understanding the society of North Korea.

In a broader perspective, it is estimated that North Korea will have significant limitations in fully opening up to religions, especially those such as Catholicism. This is because the North Korean authorities must have a close relationship with the Holy See to promote North Korean Catholicism externally and to be recognized. Although it has a window for dialogue with the Holy See, it seems difficult to form a close relationship with the Holy See due to the nature of the closed and nationalistic North Korean system. For this reason, the recognition of religions in North Korea and the normalization of relations with the Holy See would justify drastic changes in the religious policy of North Korea.

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