

Pilgrims and Progress

The Production of Religious Experience in a Korean Religion

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ABSTRACT: Since its inception, Chondogyo has self-consciously maintained an identity as a “new” and “modern” Korean religion. These claims have seen ongoing efforts to rationalize religious practice and theology and purge the movement of “anti-modern,” “superstitious” elements. This article explores the differing receptions of pilgrimage and ecstatic trance within the organization: the two major forms of embodied religious experience in Chondogyo. While the former has been actively promoted as a “legitimate” (and modern) form of religious experience, the latter is treated with ambivalence and is often connected with backward superstition. Through a comparison of these practices, I explore the ways in which they intersect with, bolster and challenge conceptions of Korean modernity.

In the summer of 2005 I attended my third pilgrimage¹ in the Korean religion of Chondogyo.² To provide the reader with a sense of the nature of Chondogyo pilgrimage and the concerns of this article, I would like to begin with a short excerpt from my field notes.

Day Three of the Pilgrimage, 7 July 2005, 12:30 p.m.: Two girls are having a particularly difficult time and say that they cannot walk any further. One girl starts crying and cries the whole way up to the top of the mountain; her great, heaving sobs can be clearly heard by all the pilgrims. . . . As we are walking, the *danjang* (the pilgrimage leader) instructs us to think

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about the difficulty we are experiencing in relation to the difficulty experienced by Choe Si-hyeong—the Chondogyo patriarch in whose footsteps we follow. We all make it up the top—barely. The girl is STILL sobbing periodically and every time I think she has calmed down she starts back up again. Another girl is consoling her and one of the guys is rubbing her feet. Yet another girl has vomited from the heat and is clearly suffering from heat exhaustion as she is very cold and shivering. I know how they feel. I want to cry and vomit myself. I think we have so far walked about 20 kms today but it feels like more. By my calculations that gives us a running total of about 90 kms so far.

I take the opportunity to talk to the leader of the pilgrimage who is lying prostrate on the ground next to me and ask him about the difference between the pilgrimage (*seongji sullye*) and other visits to sacred sites in the religion. He says that the pilgrimage is different because it is difficult. This is part of the intended purpose of the pilgrimage. It is difficulty that connects us with the three founders. Choe Si-hyeong's life was very difficult when he was hiding from the government. The difficulty we experience directly connects us with him. However, he then goes on to compare the pilgrimage with Membership Training (MT) and says that if we all have a hard time together it helps us to establish bonds like MT.

“Membership training” or “MT” is a common Korean-English (or Konglish) term adopted from Japanese English. Although the term has been taken from the language of business, in the Korean context it refers to a social retreat during which a group of work colleagues,



Photo 1. Exhausted pilgrims take a break at the top of the mountain. Photo courtesy of Kirsten Bell.

university students or members of a social club go away together to foster a greater sense of group unity and harmony, helped considerably by the consumption of large amounts of food and alcohol. While Korean university students often go on MT as part of their college experience (and virtually all of the Chondogyo pilgrims in 2005 were college students), I found the explicit juxtaposition of the pain and suffering of the pilgrimage and the corporate, secular imagery of the social “bonding” retreat both incongruous and intriguing.

Numerous scholars have pointed to the complex and dynamic character of pilgrimage, and its ability to respond to a variety of constant and changing beliefs, values and needs.³ Pilgrimage therefore provides an important vehicle for understanding larger social, cultural and political processes within contemporary life. This article uses pilgrimage as a lens into these processes. Through a comparison of various forms of religious experience in Chondogyo—particularly pilgrimage and religious training—I consider what they reveal about concepts of modernity both within Chondogyo and South Korea.

CHONDOGYO: AN OVERVIEW

Chondogyo, “The Religion of the Heavenly Way,” is the oldest of Korea’s many new religious movements (*sinheung jonggyo*). It was founded in 1860 under the name of Donghak, or “Eastern Learning,” when a man named Choe Je-u fell into a trance and experienced a revelation from God (Hanullim). Choe’s key insight was the realization that all human beings bear God (*si Cheonju*), a theme later formalized in the doctrine of *in nae Cheon* (“humans and Heaven are one”), which has become the foundation of the religion’s contemporary theology.⁴

Over the following year Choe was inspired to go out and preach his message of enlightenment, aided by two gifts he received from God: *jumun*—a 21-syllable incantation that produced ecstatic union with God when chanted repeatedly; and *yeongbu*—a magical talisman that would improve the health of sincere believers when burned into ash and drunk as a medicine.⁵ Numerous scholars have argued that Choe’s vision of religious salvation blends shamanistic, Taoist, Buddhist and Confucian symbols with Christian elements,⁶ a strategy that appears to have strengthened its appeal to the masses.

Donghak arose at a time when Korea was on the verge of radical transformations. Internally, society was stagnating under a rigid Confucian social hierarchy, which saw destitute peasants over-taxed and generally ill-used by corrupt government officials and landed gentry (*yangban*). External forces such as the West’s encroachment into the East were also causing considerable alarm. Donghak arose in these circumstances and was directly affected by such concerns. Indeed, Choe explicitly envisioned Donghak as a rebuttal to the growing influence of

the West in Korea; further, Donghak was constructed in explicit opposition to Roman Catholicism, known as “Western Learning.” Ironically, Donghak was persecuted by the government as a form of Catholicism,⁷ and in 1864 Choe suffered the same fate as many Catholic martyrs in Korea when he was beheaded for spreading a false doctrine and attempting to deceive the people.⁸

Despite ongoing government persecution, Donghak proved popular with the disaffected masses and continued to grow under the leadership of its second founder, Choe Si-hyeong. Indeed, Donghak’s widespread support can be witnessed in its involvement in a massive popular uprising against the government in 1894 known as the Donghak Peasant Uprising, often labeled the single most important event in Korea’s contemporary history.⁹ This aborted revolution inadvertently sparked a chain reaction that led to the 1894–95 Sino-Japanese War and culminated in the creation of a Japanese protectorate in Korea in 1905.

In the wake of the uprising, the persecution of Donghak became even more intense, and in 1898 Choe Si-hyeong was martyred, although prior to his death he managed to oversee the publication of the Donghak Scriptures (*Donggyeong Daejeon*) and establish many hidden congregations throughout the southern part of the Korea.¹⁰ Thus, at the turn of the nineteenth century, leadership of the movement passed to its third revered founder, Seon Byeong-hui.

TWENTIETH-CENTURY KOREA AND THE DRIVE TO MODERNIZE

Twentieth-century Korea was a country confronted with radical change. In 1910 Japan annexed Korea and three and a half decades of Japanese colonialism followed. The colonial period ended abruptly with the Allied division of the country at the end of World War II and the subsequent Korean War. Given the devastating effects of war, the humiliating legacy of Japanese colonialism, and the onslaught of Western ideologies of development and modernization, constructing a positive national identity in Korea has been particularly difficult.

Under the leadership of Park Chung-hee (following his 1961 military coup), South Korea began a program of modernization marked by rapid economic growth and dramatic social and political change. The Park government’s modernist project explicitly aimed to eliminate “traditionalist” elements of Korean society, while promoting elements seen to epitomize the nation’s unique cultural identity.

The modernization project, from an institutional perspective, meant western style institutional development in the context of industrialization, scientific and technological innovation, urbanization and building of a modern nation-state, and so on. . . . [R]ight from the

beginning there were conflicts and tensions surrounding meanings, values, and norms embedded in the modernization project. . . . As the ideology of the modernization project developed, the conflicts and tensions were organized and signified through more paradigmatic opposition, such as West and East/Korea, tradition and modernity. . . .¹¹

The demands of cultural nationalism were therefore in direct contrast to the goal of modernization, given the mutually incompatible ways that tradition and modernity had been defined. As Nicholas Dirks has pointed out, “the modern has liberated us from tradition and constantly conceives itself in relation to it.”¹² As an ideological position, modernity thus implies an embrace of technological and social innovation and a renunciation of the past, which is associated with oppressive and irrational tradition.¹³ Yet it is precisely this “tradition” that the government sought to preserve.

The government’s attempt to efface “backward” practices while preserving unique Korean traditions saw the introduction of a number of contradictory cultural policies during the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁴ These policies mobilized the whole nation by making the state-sponsored modernization project a collective effort¹⁵ and encompassing all institutions under the auspices of the “New Community” (*Saemaeul*) movement.¹⁶

This modernization project has had a particularly strong impact on Korea’s religions, which have experienced an especially ambivalent reception. As Charles Keyes, Helen Hardacre and Laurel Kendall note, “the process of creating modern nation-states has . . . entailed two rather contradictory stances toward religion.”¹⁷ Religions have been simultaneously lauded as repositories of national tradition and condemned as relics of a backward and superstitious past. For example, although Korean shamans are held up as exemplars of indigenous folk culture, as Kendall points out, they have also been portrayed as the “superstitious antithesis of modernity.”¹⁸ The ecstatic and “superstitious” (*misin*) aspects of shamanic rituals have been heavily criticized as primitive and ignorant, and by 1972 they were targeted by state-initiated, anti-superstition campaigns.¹⁹ As Chungmoo Choi asserts, the contradictory policies implemented in South Korea revealed the dilemmas of “a new state with old traditions, torn between two modes of thought.”²⁰

The rise of Protestant Christianity in twentieth-century Korea²¹ can be viewed in the context of its association with development and modernization,²² an association long emphasized by both missionaries and converts, who tend to represent Christianity as the “ethical base” on which modern civilization can be established.²³ Indeed, in the early twentieth century, some progressive-minded intellectuals, seeing modernization as the most urgent task facing Korea, encouraged Koreans to

become Christians out of patriotism.²⁴ However, Christianity began as a “foreign import” and is still regarded as such by many Koreans.²⁵

Korean new religious movements have had important roles to play in attempting to resolve the tensions between modernization and nationalism. The desire to be modern (*hyeondaejeok*) that has engaged Korean women and men for several generations²⁶ has similarly preoccupied many of these religions. As Robert Bellah has shown, such movements entail “the reinterpretation of a particular religious tradition to show not only that it is compatible with modernization but also that, when truly understood, the tradition vigorously demands at least important aspects of modernity.”²⁷

In the context of Chondogyo, the attempt throughout the last century to construct a “modern” religion has seen similar efforts to rationalize religious practice and theology and purge the movement of anti-modern, superstitious elements. Indeed, the third founder of Donghak, Seon Byeong Hui, took up the drive to modernize with evangelical zeal, instigating a number of reforms that fundamentally transformed the religion. In 1905 he changed the sect’s name from Donghak (Eastern Learning) to Chondogyo (Religion of the Heavenly Way). This was followed by attempts to unify and standardize the religion’s theory and update religious practices. The magical talisman (*yeongbu*) did not survive these early drives to modernize, and other magical practices were culled in the early twentieth century. Significantly, the incantation (*jumun*), Choe’s other gift from God, managed to outlive the movement’s transition into a “modern” religion, although Chondogyo theologians have taken pains to emphasize that while *yeongbu* was a kind of magical charm (*bujeok*), *jumun* was more fundamentally religious.²⁸ As Carl Young notes, “The abandonment of folk tradition was part of a reinterpretation that affirmed that it was not necessary to convert to Western ways and religion, but that modernity could be achieved while being faithful to a Korean religious tradition.”²⁹

In 1906 Seon introduced a new religious form—*siil sik*—a weekly Sunday service that bore a striking resemblance to Christian worship, down to the sermon and hymns. He also set up a parish system and abolished personal control of the sect in favor of a bureaucratic and democratic headquarters (*Jungang Chongbu*) overseen by an elected leader. Furthermore, Seon created numerous organizational bodies such as the Women’s Association (Yeoseonghoe) and the Youth Association (Jeongnyeonghoe), which were direct copies of Christian versions. Through such measures Seon attempted to represent Chondogyo as a rational, modern religion opposed to superstition.³⁰ However, just as the competing demands of modernization and cultural nationalism have been difficult to reconcile at the nation-state level, they have proved similarly difficult to reconcile in Chondogyo.

THE PARTICULARITIES OF PILGRIMAGE

The remainder of this article explores the ways in which forms of Chondogyo worship have been caught up in the religion’s struggle to assert a “modern” yet distinctively Korean identity. Tracing the emergence of pilgrimage in Chondogyo yields interesting insights into the ways that modernity has been conceptualized in South Korea.

Chondogyo pilgrimage (*seongji sullye*) is an annual event of recent vintage—the first pilgrimage was held in 1982. All pilgrimages follow a general pattern, although their specific elements tend to change from year to year. Held over the course of three to seven days, pilgrimages endeavor to retrace the footsteps (*dalmagagi*) of various key figures in Chondogyo. The three venerated founders of the religion—Choe Je-u, Choe Si-hyeong, and Seon Byeong-hui—are the primary focus of pilgrimage journeys, although pilgrimages are also regularly held to retrace the footsteps of Jeon Beong-jun, a Chondogyo adherent who led the 1894 Donghak Uprising. Thus, annual pilgrimages follow a set schedule designated by the Chondogyo headquarters and rotate around the key figures and historical events in the religion’s history (see figure 1).

As the goal of the pilgrimage is to walk in the footsteps of key leaders, the bulk of the journey takes place on foot. After meeting in a designated location somewhere in the countryside and staying the night in the relative comfort of a hostel (*minbak*), the pilgrimage officially begins the following day. For the duration of the journey, pilgrims awaken between 4:00 and 4.30 a.m. and walk from 7:00 a.m. until anywhere between 5:00 and 9:00 p.m., stopping only to prepare meals of ramen noodles and take occasional short breaks, which become increasingly

FIGURE 1. Chondogyo Pilgrimage Cycle 1998–2005

Year	Key Figure	Event Re-enacted
1998	Choe Si-hyeong	Retracing his footsteps before he died.
1999	Cheon Bong Jun	Retracing his footsteps during the Donghak Peasant Uprising.
2000	Choe Je-u	Retracing his footsteps during important events of his life.
2001	Choe Si-hyeong	Retracing his footsteps during the Donghak Peasant Uprising.
2002	Seon Byeong-hui	Retracing his footsteps during the Donghak Peasant Uprising.
2003	Seon Byeong-hui	Retracing his footsteps during the March First Movement.
2004	Choe Je-u	Retracing his footsteps during important events of his life.
2005	Choe Si-hyeong	Retracing his footsteps before he died.

frequent given the bodily deterioration pilgrims experience as the pilgrimage progresses. After setting up camp, pilgrims retire between 10:00 and 11:00 p.m. to the crowded confines of small, leaky, sex-segregated tents. On the eve of the end of the pilgrimage a large celebration is held involving copious amounts of food and drink to celebrate the completion of this important event.

While anyone is free to attend, the pilgrimage is organized by the Chondogyo's University Student Group (Daehagsaengdan) in conjunction with the Youth Association and attended largely by members of these groups. Thus, the average age of pilgrims tends to range between 18 and 25, although a 39-year-old housewife attended in 2005. However, older Chondogyo adherents often complete at least part of the pilgrimage, joining pilgrims on the weekend and occasionally bringing the whole family, including small children. Only a small proportion of adherents participate in the full pilgrimage,³¹ and it has been shrinking in size each year, reflecting a decline in the size of Chondogyo.³² Nevertheless, there is a general sense that pilgrims are completing the pilgrimage for all adherents, especially those who cannot make the journey themselves.

The walking pilgrimage takes place at the height of the Korean summer, with its high levels of humidity, constant downpours, and occasional threat of typhoon.³³ Given South Korea's unrelentingly hilly terrain, the circumstances under which pilgrimages take place are



Photo 2. Pilgrims on the 2005 Chondogyo pilgrimage. Photo courtesy of Kirsten Bell.

invariably difficult, and the demanding conditions are compounded by the grueling schedule. It therefore comes as no surprise that the constant refrain of pilgrims from almost their first step to their last is “*himdeulda*” or some variation of it. This word, translated as “exacting, arduous, painful,” has been the one constant on the three pilgrimages I have attended. However, despite the difficulty involved, pilgrimage in Chondogyo is not penitential, nor do the pilgrims suffer for the glory of God. Rather, their pain creates a conduit between the pilgrims and the founders of religion—and ultimately God.

According to the brochure provided at the beginning of each pilgrimage, by walking in the footsteps of the Chondogyo patriarchs and experiencing what they experienced, pilgrims can attain direct communion with God. Although the goal is to duplicate the circumstances under which the religious founders traveled, buses may be used when absolutely necessary, if the planned route covers a great deal of ground in the limited time frame. Generally, pilgrims tend to walk on average between 30 to 40 kilometers per day; for example, in 2005 we walked 160 kilometers in five days.

The reasons for attending the pilgrimage vary considerably. In 2005 one pilgrim explained that although she was not very keen on the prospect of the pilgrimage, she came to fulfill a promise she made to God if she passed her university entrance exam. Others said they were pressured to participate by friends. However, when asked, most pilgrims stated they were making the pilgrimage to learn more about Chondogyo and strengthen their understanding of Chondogyo truths. On the 2005 pilgrimage, a young woman explained that during a discussion about religion in one of her university classes, she told her professor she belonged to Chondogyo and he asked, “What’s that?”³⁴ Because she felt she could not describe her religion well, she joined the pilgrimage as a good opportunity to learn more about her faith.

Unlike other forms of Chondogyo worship, such as the Sunday service (*siil sik*), the pilgrimage is regarded as providing *jigjeop*—direct, personal, immediate “experience” of God. As one adherent explained, looking at a picture of an animal is different from actually going to the zoo. That is, the pilgrimage is like actually experiencing the animals rather than just studying them from afar.

Jigjeop is an extremely important concept in Chondogyo, and is used by adherents to distinguish their religion from Christianity. Indeed, Chondogyo religious identity tends to be defined in opposition to Christianity—or at least a stereotyped understanding of it. Thus, Chondogyo adherents regularly preface statements about their religion with, “unlike Christianity, we believe. . . .” The first point of contrast concerns the relation between the human and divine. Chondogyo adherents often say, “unlike Christianity, in Chondogyo it is possible to become Jesus.” Or, “unlike Christianity, in Chondogyo everyone can

be God.” A second, related view is that unlike Christianity, Chondogyo is a religion of experience, as opposed to study. It is a little ironic that the pilgrimage has become a means through which Chondogyo adherents assert the superiority of their faith over Christianity, given that they appear to have borrowed this practice from their Christian cousins.

While there has been a strong tradition of pilgrimage in Korea, particularly in Korean Buddhism, these earlier pilgrimages tended to be informal and solitary undertakings. Thus, the group-walking pilgrimage practiced in Chondogyo today does *not* represent the continuation of a long history of pilgrimage in the country. In fact, the term *seongji sullye* itself is not used in pre-modern Korean texts and seems to have been coined by modern Christians.³⁵ Pilgrimage in Chondogyo takes its cues from Christian walking pilgrimages, such as the Road to Chartres, where the focus is on the journey rather than the sacred site itself (e.g., Lourdes). Like the walking pilgrimages popular in Korea among Protestant Christian youth groups, there is a self-conscious attempt to divorce this form of worship from “magical” phenomena, such as the miracles and cures seen to characterize Lourdes, Medjugorje, and other famous pilgrimage sites.

PILGRIMAGE VERSUS RELIGIOUS TRAINING

There is a much older religious practice in Chondogyo that is also strongly associated with *jigjeop*: religious training (*suryeon*). *Suryeon* constitutes the original method of obtaining religious knowledge and was present from the beginning of Chondogyo. In stark contrast to the Christian-style Sunday service, religious training is more overtly Buddhist in orientation, following the lunar calendar and proceeding in 49-day cycles. There is little formal religious instruction, as adherents sit cross-legged on the floor and chant *jumun* (the 21-syllable incantation) over successive two-hour periods in both loud (*hyeon-song*) and silent (*muksong*) forms. The training is notable in that it regularly produces an ecstatic trance known as *gangnyeong* (“descent of the spirit”).³⁶ *Gangnyeong* generally manifests itself in convulsions or “shaking” (*tteollida*), as well as crying, moaning and occasional minor acts of self-mortification (such as pulling one’s hair or punching some part of the body).

There are a number of similarities between religious training and pilgrimage, and spontaneous comparisons between the two are not uncommon among pilgrims. Like pilgrimage, religious training is a group affair. Generally a group of people, whether members of Chondogyo’s Women’s Association or members of a parish (*gyogu*), will make a trip up to one of Chondogyo’s remote *sudowon* (religious training centers), all of which are located in the mountains, much in the manner of Buddhist temples in Korea. There they spend a week in



Photo 3. Religious training at a *sudowon*. Photo courtesy of Kirsten Bell.

intensive religious training, waking between 4:00 and 4.30 a.m. and training until 9:00 p.m., with short breaks for food and rest. Like pilgrimage, religious training is difficult: sitting cross-legged on the floor and chanting for twelve hours a day is not easy.

Similarities between meditation and pilgrimage have not been lost on scholars such as Victor and Edith Turner, who have famously characterized pilgrimage as “extroverted mysticism, just as mysticism is introverted pilgrimage.”³⁷ Similarly, Alan Morinis emphasizes the continuities between what he labels terrestrial and metaphorical or “inner” pilgrimages. In the latter form, ascetics learn to visit the sacred shrines in their own bodies, conceiving devotion as a journey to God.³⁸

Yet, despite their similarities, pilgrimage and religious training have a very different reception in Chondogyo today. While pilgrimage is a recent addition to Chondogyo’s religious repertoire, religious training has a contested history and the forms of ecstatic trance it produces are presently received with a great deal of ambivalence. Indeed, although religious training is currently endorsed in Chondogyo, for a long period it was banned. According to one informant, the ban on religious training was the result of a political struggle within the movement: one faction argued that exclusive emphasis should be on formal study of religious philosophy, while the other believed religious training to be more important. For a time, those promoting formal study won out and demanded that people stop religious training. Thus, for a long period there was no official religious training in Chondogyo. During this

period the only formally available form of worship was the Christian-style Sunday service, but during the 1980s religious training was reinstated and today is considered an integral part of religious practice. However, some people in Chondogyo's central headquarters still disapprove of religious training, particularly its connection with ecstatic trance. Indeed, the condemnations of trance I have witnessed have invariably come from officials within Chondogyo's headquarters.

While religious training has been under attack for some time, religious authorities endorse pilgrimage and its reception is far less ambiguous. There are several reasons for this. Importantly, although religious training may be seen as a form of "inner" pilgrimage, whereby adherents are transported to the divine realm of God, this process occurs in an unmediated and uncontrolled fashion.³⁹ Pilgrimage, on the other hand, is more amenable to external control, and a number of scholars have written about the ways it may be harnessed by a religious organization to enhance its own legitimacy.⁴⁰ The religious organization can successfully indoctrinate pilgrims, in their highly aroused state, with orthodox ideology and beliefs.

In Chondogyo, the central administration maintains control over the site and purpose of each annual pilgrimage. Although there are several sacred places (*seongji*) that all Chondogyo adherents recognize,⁴¹ pilgrimage sites become such because the central administration deems them to have sacred significance. Because the site of the pilgrimage changes each year, in many respects individual pilgrimage sites do not build up a specific identity that prefigures people's conception of the pilgrimage experience. Thus, the annual pilgrimage's specific purpose and route can be configured to reflect the organization's current concerns.⁴²

The booklet pilgrims receive at the beginning of the pilgrimage informs them of how they should understand the event. As the excerpt from my field notes at the beginning of this article reveals, throughout the course of the pilgrimage participants are continually reminded of its purpose and are brought into stark relation to those symbols and beliefs the organization wishes to impress upon them. Comments from a pilgrim on the 1999 pilgrimage, which retraced the steps of Jeon Bong-Jun and the other Donghak revolutionaries, reveal this technique to be effective.⁴³ The pilgrim wrote of the special feeling surrounding the sacred sites and noted that he felt as if he were girding himself for battle, just as revolutionaries had done 105 years earlier.⁴⁴ It is clear that in their heightened state of enthusiasm and commitment, pilgrims are far more susceptible to this symbolism because they experience it at a direct, bodily level.

Aside from representing a form of religiosity that entails *jigjeop* in a somewhat controlled form, pilgrimage has an added advantage over religious training. Unlike pilgrimage, religious training is potentially and pejoratively associated with Korean shamanism—a connection

many Chondogyo adherents explicitly recognize. According to one informant, the shaman dances with the energy of the gods, but afterwards returns to a normal state; a similar experience of altered consciousness is found in religious training. Other adherents emphasize the similarities of ecstatic trance (*gangnyeong*) to shamanic trance. These comparisons do not refer to any actual connection, given the radically different circumstances in which the two occur, but they do reveal something of the way ecstatic trance is perceived in Chondogyo, given the negative view that most adherents hold of shamanism.

Considering the popularity of Pentecostal Christianity in Korea and the widespread belief that Christianity is a “modern” religion, one might ask why expressions of religious ecstasy in Chondogyo are often deemed to be connected with shamans (*mudang* or *mansin*) and superstition (*misin*). This is an important question. Numerous scholars have noted that Pentecostal forms of Christianity in Korea appear to have been shamanized.⁴⁵ Indeed, “mainline Protestant theologians sometimes blame ‘shamanism’ for predisposing Koreans to Pentecostal religions in which prayer is a magical means to a materialist end”⁴⁶ and some argue that the content and structure of Korean Christian beliefs are basically shamanistic.⁴⁷ Further, Youngsook Kim Harvey asserts that churches that move away from a Pentecostal worship style lose members to those that do not.⁴⁸ The fact that the largest Christian congregation in Korea (and the world, for that matter) is Pentecostal would seem to support this assertion.⁴⁹ However, it should be emphasized that while scholars and theologians may assert a connection between Pentecostal forms of ecstasy and shamanic beliefs and practices, Pentecostal Christians in Korea energetically deny this connection.⁵⁰ Indeed, on the whole they have been more successful in disassociating ecstatic forms of religious worship from shamanism than Chondogyo.

Pilgrimage, unlike religious training, entails *jigjeop* (direct experience), but it does not produce the same problematic manifestations of charisma that dog the latter practice. Moreover, despite its Christian influence, Chondogyo is strongly associated with a distinctively Korean identity: although pilgrimage has been modeled on Christian forms, it first emerged in the context of the *minjung undong*—“the people’s movement”—a form of populist nationalism that peaked in South Korea during the 1980s.

PILGRIMAGE, KOREAN NATIONALISM AND THE *MINJUNG* MOVEMENT

I only became aware of the connection between Chondogyo pilgrimage and the *minjung* movement in 2005. On the second day of the pilgrimage, we were in a small town when in the distance I spotted a group of young people dressed similarly to ourselves, right down to the

large straw hats and blue shirts we wore to identify ourselves as Chondogyo pilgrims. I was told it was merely a group of university students who had come during their summer vacation to help farmers with harvesting. These student trips to the countryside, known as *nongchon hwaldong undong* (farming village activism), are a legacy of the student movement and were instrumental in facilitating both student and farmer activism throughout the 1980s.⁵¹ Spurred by a desire to reclaim the *minjung* voice, students visited rural villages during summer vacations to help with harvesting and stimulate political consciousness among farmers.

I cannot begin to do justice to the complexities of the *minjung* movement here, given the considerable debate as to how to characterize the phenomenon. In the 1980s the term “*minjung*” could be combined with almost anything from history to music, art, film, religion and politics.⁵² However, according to Ken Wells, “the master narrative of the *minjung* movement is the struggle for cultural definition, for the sense of what it means to be and act as ‘the Korean people’ amidst the far-reaching global and domestic changes that have affected them personally.”⁵³ As Nancy Abelmann notes, the movement wrestled “legacies of anticolonial, antiimperial, and leftist struggle occluded by the dictates of the official memory of the cold war and of military authoritarianism.”⁵⁴

While *minjung* activism clearly arose as a response to the repressive political regime under Chun Doo Hwan’s military junta (1980–1988), it must also be located within South Korea’s newly industrialized economic circumstances and its emerging status as an Asian tiger economy.⁵⁵ This economic success led to a “swelling of national pride,”⁵⁶ an increasing reflexivity about Koreanness, and the search for a new cultural identity.⁵⁷ According to Kendall, during this period, “[o]ne often heard it stated that perhaps too much of Korean culture had been thrown away in the rush to modernize,”⁵⁸ and there was increasing interest in reclaiming “lost” cultural forms, along with growing anti-American sentiment in the country. Thus, the 1980s witnessed a heightening of two contradictory impulses: the ongoing drive to develop and “modernize,” and an attempt to rediscover nativistic religions and traditional culture by Korean intellectuals.⁵⁹ During this period there was a growing sense of loss at the sacrifices Koreans had made in the drive to be modern.

The changes in religious practice in Chondogyo in the 1980s must be seen in light of these developments. As previously indicated, at the beginning of this period the only form of worship in Chondogyo was *siil sik* (Christian-style Sunday service) because religious training had been banned. Thus, despite its status as an indigenous religion, Chondogyo looked rather Christian. I therefore speculate that the reintroduction of religious training during this period was connected to this new, self-conscious attempt to assert a distinctively Korean identity. As we have seen, however, despite its reintroduction, religious training has continued

to carry the stigma attached to shamanism. It appears that pilgrimage emerged during this period as a religious form responsive to the needs of the movement to develop practices both modern and distinctively Korean.

It is possible to trace the origins of Chondogyo pilgrimage directly to the student farming village activism and the search for the authentic *minjung* spirit. Given the influence of the student movement on university campuses during the 1980s,⁶⁰ a large number of 1980s *hakpeon* (students who entered college in this period) attended summer trips at least once before graduating. In light of the 1982 origins of Chondogyo pilgrimage as an event organized by Chondogyo university students—many of which had undoubtedly been on these trips to the villages—the connection seems undeniable. Moreover, these student trips exhibit strong parallels with the Chondogyo pilgrimage in organization, arduous schedule, timing, friendship bonds, and the goal of recapturing the *minjung* spirit through experiencing the lives of underprivileged farmers.

The connection becomes even more apparent when exploring the *minjung* counterhistories written during the 1980s, as many of these activists located the birth of the *minjung* spirit in the Donghak movement—in particular, the 1894 Donghak Peasant Uprising.⁶¹ Indeed, in the 1980s *minjung* activists celebrated Donghak as the birth of the Korean spirit;⁶² Jeon Bong-jun, leader of the uprising, became the most popular icon of the *minjung* movement and ideology.⁶³ The fact that the earliest Chondogyo pilgrimages were attended by many university students who were *not* Chondogyo adherents seems to provide further evidence of the ways Chondogyo pilgrimage was being framed as celebrating the birth of *minjung* consciousness. It is also interesting that so many Chondogyo pilgrimages continue to focus on retracing the footsteps of the 1894 Donghak revolutionaries, suggesting further evidence of the pilgrimage's roots within the *minjung* movement.

It therefore seems that pilgrimage is viewed as less problematic than the other two major forms of worship in Chondogyo: religious training and the Sunday service. Religious training is associated with Korean “tradition,” but is too closely associated with the negative connotations attached to Korean shamanism; on the other hand, the Sunday service is seen to be modern, but too strongly associated with Christianity. Pilgrimage, while clearly taking a Christian form, is intrinsically tied to the search for a distinctively Korean identity and therefore fits the criteria for an indigenous, modern religious practice.

CONCLUSION

My goal in this article has been to explore ways in which forms of worship in the Korean religion of Chondogyo have become tied up with larger social, historical, and political forces that have shaped

contemporary South Korea. It is clear that the competing demands of cultural nationalism and modernization, which have led to contradictory policies in South Korea, have also created certain tensions within Chondogyo. Chondogyo leaders' desire to represent their religion as a modern, indigenous movement has led to some rather contradictory tendencies. Practices such as religious training (*suryeon*) have been associated with stigmatized shamanism, while forms of worship such as the Sunday service (*sil sik*) were instituted precisely because of their association with "modern" Christianity, a religion Chondogyo is forever defining itself against. Pilgrimage, on the other hand, seems to provide a form of worship that fits Chondogyo's goal to assert "indigenous modernity."

Although pilgrimage in its present form is an adaptation of a Christian practice, its origins are firmly located in the *minjung* movement and the search to reclaim a distinctively Korean identity. It provides adherents with direct experience (*jigjeop*) of God in a form more controllable by the organization than ecstatic trance (*gangnyeong*) manifested during religious training. In other words, it represents a form of embodied spirituality that is essentially containable. For these reasons, its emergence in 1982 can be seen to represent a timely response to the ongoing dilemmas Chondogyo faces in its desire to show its compatibility with the demands of Korean modernity.

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ENDNOTES

¹ I also participated in the pilgrimage in 1998 and 2002.

² Romanization of this word, according to guidelines of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in the Republic of Korea, is Cheondogyo. However, throughout this article I use the spelling that Chondogyo leaders prefer.

³ Jill Dubisch, *In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995); and Alan Mirinis, ed., *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1992).

⁴ KIM Yong Choon, *The Ch'ondogyo Concept of Man: An Essence of Korean Thought* (Seoul: Pan Korea Book Corporation, 1989).

⁵ Roderick Bucknell, and Paul Beirne, "In Search of the Yeongbu: The Lost Talisman of Korea's Tonghak Religion," *Review of Korean Studies* 4, no. 2 (2001): 201–22.

⁶ CHUNG Chai Sik, "Religion and Cultural Identity: The Case of 'Eastern Learning,'" *International Yearbook for the Sociology of Religion* 5 (1969): 118–32. See also Kim, *Ch'ondogyo Concept of Man*; Bucknell and Bierne, "In Search of the Yeongbu"; Benjamin Weems, *Reform, Rebellion and the Heavenly Way* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1964); and CH'OE Dong-hi, "Object of Faith in Eastern Learning," *Korea Journal* 5, no. 12 (1965): 4–12.

⁷ There is clear evidence that Choe Je-u had come into contact with Catholicism and was clearly influenced by its teachings, although he defined his own religion in opposition to it. See Weems, *Reform, Rebellion and the Heavenly Way*, 8; and Bucknell and Bierne, "In Search of the Yeongbu," 204.

⁸ Weems, *Reform, Rebellion and the Heavenly Way*, 7–12.

⁹ See Robert Pearson Flaherty, "JeungSanDo and the Great Opening of the Later Heaven: Millenarianism, Syncretism and the Religion of Gang Il-sun," *Nova Religio* 7, no. 3 (March 2004): 29–31.

¹⁰ Carl Young, "Embracing Modernity: Organizational and Ritual Reform in Ch'ondogyo, 1905–1910," *Asian Studies Review* 29, no. 1 (2005): 47–60.

¹¹ KIM Eun Shil, "The Cultural Logic of the Korean Modernization Project and Its Gender Politics," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 6, no. 2 (2000): 50–77.

¹² Quoted in Laurel Kendall, *Getting Married in Korea: Of Gender, Morality, and Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 72.

¹³ Laurel Kendall, "Introduction," in *Under Construction: The Gendering of Modernity, Class, and Consumption in the Republic of Korea*, ed. Laurel Kendall (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 2.

¹⁴ Kendall, *Getting Married in Korea*, 72.

¹⁵ Kim, "Cultural Logic of the Korean Modernization Project."

¹⁶ The *Saemaeul* movement was an ambitious project initiated in the early 1970s to modernize rural villages. See OH Myung-seok, "Peasant Culture and Modernization in Korea: Cultural Implications of the Saemaeul Movement in the 1970s," in *Korean Anthropology: Contemporary Korean Culture in Flux*, ed. Korean National Commission for UNESCO (Elizabeth, N.J.: Hollym, 2003), 159–74. As Oh notes, the goal of the *Saemaeul* movement was to accelerate modernization while maintaining the virtues of tradition, an impossible task given the way that modernization had been defined. Nevertheless, "[t]he movement has left indelible effects on the landscape and life of Korea's villages" (159).

¹⁷ Charles Keyes, Helen Hardacre, and Laurel Kendall, "Introduction: Contested Visions of Community in East and Southeast Asia," in *Asian Visions of Authority: Religion and the Modern States of East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Charles Keyes, Helen Hardacre, and Laurel Kendall (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 6.

¹⁸ Laurel Kendall, "Who Speaks for Korean Shamans When Shamans Speak of the Nation?" in *Making Majorities: Constituting the Nation in Japan, Korea, China, Malaysia, Fiji, Turkey, and the United States*, ed. Dru Gladney (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 63.

¹⁹ Chungmoo Choi, "Hegemony and Shamanism: The State, the Elite, and the Shamans in Contemporary Korea," in *Religion and Society in Contemporary Korea*, ed. Lewis Lancaster and Richard Payne (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1997), 19–48. The association between shamanism and backward tradition is a long-standing one, and did not emerge only in the twentieth century. See Youngsook Kim Harvey, "The Shaman and the Deaconess: Sisters in Different Guises," in *Religion and Ritual in Korean Society*, ed. Laurel Kendall and Griffin Dix (Berkeley: Institute for East Asian Studies, 1987), 149–70.

²⁰ Choi, "Hegemony and Shamanism," 27.

²¹ South Korea is the only country in continental Asia today where Christianity is officially the dominant religion. Currently over one-quarter of South Korea's religious population define themselves as Christian, although it is unclear how accurately census statistics reflect religious affiliation.

²² I am not suggesting that the connection between Christianity and modernization is the sole reason for the religion's remarkable success, as there is a range of very complex factors and historical accidents undoubtedly responsible for its contemporary dominance. See Spencer Palmer, *Korea and Christianity* (Seoul: Seoul Computer Press, 1986). Indeed, the influence of Christianity throughout twentieth-century Korea has been disproportionate to its size because of the large number of Christians among vocal Korean reformist intellectuals and leading nationalists. See Kenneth Wells, *New God, New Nation: Protestants and Self-reconstruction Nationalism in Korea 1896–1937* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990).

²³ Young, "Embracing Modernity," 49.

²⁴ Harvey, "The Shaman and the Deaconess," 154.

²⁵ Wells, *New God, New Nation*, 7.

²⁶ Kendall, *Under Construction*, 5.

²⁷ Robert Bellah, "Epilogue: Religion and Progress in Modern Asia," in *Religion and Progress in Modern Asia*, ed. Robert Bellah (New York: Free Press, 1965), 207. Of course, this preoccupation is not unique to Korean new religious movements, but can be seen in religious reform movements around the world, from Protestant Buddhism in Sri Lanka to Hindu reform movements in India. See Richard Gombrich, and Gananath Obeyeskere, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981); Ninian Smart, "Tradition, Retrospective Perception, Nationalism and Modernism," in *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, ed. Paul Heelas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 79–89.

²⁸ See CHOI Dong-hee, "Tonghak Thought and Modernization (I)," *Korea Journal* 13, no. 10 (1973): 4–9.

²⁹ Young, "Embracing Modernity," 56.

³⁰ Young, "Embracing Modernity," 56.

³¹ The pilgrimage is by no means large, generally drawing only between ten and thirty-five people. On the first pilgrimage I attended in 1998 there were thirty

people. On the second in 2002 there were twelve pilgrims, although one female dropped out on the second day. On the pilgrimage in 2005 there were eleven pilgrims.

³² In the 1995 census there were 26,818 South Koreans who claimed affiliation with Chondogyo. This figure represents less than 0.1 percent of the population. See Office of Religious Affairs, *Hanguk'e chonggyo hyŏnhwang* [Current Status of Religions in Korea] (Seoul: Munhwa Kwangwangbu [Ministry of Culture and Tourism], 1998).

³³ A typhoon actually hit during the pilgrimage I attended in 2002, radically disrupting the proceedings.

³⁴ This is a fairly common response, as Chondogyo is not widely recognized in Korea today, although most people have heard of its original form, Donghak. For a discussion of why Chondogyo is largely invisible today, despite its celebrated origins, see Kirsten Bell, "Cheondogyo and the Donghak Revolution: The (Un)making of a Religion," *Korea Journal* 44, no. 2 (2004): 123–48.

³⁵ T. Vladimar, personal communication, Koreaweb Discussion List, 1999.

³⁶ For a discussion of ecstatic trance in Chondogyo, see Kirsten Bell, "The Gendering of Religious Experience: Ecstatic Trance in Cheondogyo," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 9, no. 2 (2003): 7–37; and Kirsten Bell, "The Trouble with Charisma: Religious Ecstasy in Ch'ondogyo," *Asian Studies Review* 29 (2005): 3–18.

³⁷ Victor Turner, and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 33.

³⁸ Alan Morinis, "Introduction," in *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, ed. Alan Morinis (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1992), 4.

³⁹ I have written elsewhere about the ways in which religious training and accompanying manifestations of charisma undermine and disrupt the political structure of Chondogyo. See Bell, "The Trouble with Charisma."

⁴⁰ Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*. See also R. L. Stirrat, "Place and Person in Sinhala Catholic Pilgrimage," in *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*, ed. John Eade and Michael Sallnow (London: Routledge, 1991), 122–36.

⁴¹ Such as Yeongdam Pavilion on Gumi Mountain where Choe Je-u experienced the divine revelation that compelled him to form his new religion, and the burial places of the three revered founders.

⁴² For example, 1998 commemorated the hundredth anniversary of the death of the religion's second founder, Choe Si-hyeong, and the pilgrimage that year retraced his footsteps before he died.

⁴³ These comments were published in *Siningan* (New Humanity), the monthly Chondogyo magazine highlighting important news and events in the religion available by subscription to all adherents in the country. It should be pointed out that these comments were undoubtedly chosen for publication in Chondogyo's official magazine because they reflected the official goal of the pilgrimage: direct experience (*jigjeop*) by walking in the footsteps of key leaders.

⁴⁴ KANG Han-Sun, "Che 17ch'a Daehagsaengdan Songji Sullyegi" [The 17th Annual Chondogyo University Student's Association Pilgrimage], in *Siningan*, 9 (1999): 100–03.

⁴⁵ Harvey, “The Shaman and the Deaconess”; and Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (London: Cassell, 1996).

⁴⁶ Laurel Kendall, “Korean Shamans and the Spirits of Capitalism,” *American Anthropologist* 98, no. 3 (1998): 514.

⁴⁷ Harvey, “The Shaman and the Deaconess,” 159.

⁴⁸ Harvey, “The Shaman and the Deaconess,” 159.

⁴⁹ Cox, *Fire from Heaven*, 221.

⁵⁰ Cox, *Fire from Heaven*, 226. The fact that Pentecostal Christians and ministers strenuously deny a connection with shamanism provides further evidence of the widespread stigma attached to shamanism. See KIM Chongho, *Korean Shamanism: The Cultural Paradox* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2003).

⁵¹ Nancy Abelmann, “Reorganizing and Recapturing Dissent in 1990s South Korea: The Case of Farmers,” in *Between Resistance and Revolution: Cultural Politics and Social Protest*, ed. Richard Fox and Orin Starn (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 251–76.

⁵² Abelmann, “Reorganizing and Recapturing Dissent,” 251.

⁵³ Kenneth Wells, “Introduction,” in *South Korea’s Minjung Movement: The Culture and Politics of Dissidence*, ed. Kenneth Wells (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 3.

⁵⁴ Abelmann, “Reorganizing and Recapturing Dissent,” 251.

⁵⁵ CHO Hae-joang, “Constructing and Deconstructing ‘Koreanness,’” in Gladney, *Making Majorities*, 73–91.

⁵⁶ Kendall, *Getting Married in Korea*, 73.

⁵⁷ Cho, “Constructing and Deconstructing ‘Koreanness.’”

⁵⁸ Kendall, *Getting Married in Korea*, 73.

⁵⁹ Cho, “Constructing and Deconstructing ‘Koreanness,’” 80.

⁶⁰ Abelmann, “Reorganizing and Recapturing Dissent,” 254. As Abelmann points out, while not all university students in the 1980s were committed activists, the vast majority shared the movement’s perspective.

⁶¹ *Minjung* narratives depict the Donghak Uprising as a revolution against the oppressive government. See Bell, “Cheondogyo and the Donghak Revolution,” for a discussion of the ways in which the uprising has been appropriated by several political movements to enhance their own agendas.

⁶² Kenneth Wells, “The Cultural Construction of Korean History,” in Wells, *South Korea’s Minjung Movement*, 11–30.

⁶³ SONG Changzoo, “The Contending Discourses of Nationalism in Post-colonial Korea and Nationalism as an Oppressive and Anti-democratic Force,” Ph.D. diss., University of Hawaii, 1999, 7.