

## Personal Lineage as the Main Organizational Principle in Daesoon Jinrihoe

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**ABSTRACT:** Studies of both traditional and new religions often focus mostly on doctrine. However, East Asian religions, old and new, are oriented to self-cultivation, and exhibit unique organizational features. The article argues that organization is more important than belief to define Korean new religions. The principle of master-disciple personal relationship (*yeomwon*) was the key organizational principle in Donghak and his successor Cheondoism, Won Buddhism, and the organizations that evolved into Daesoon Jinrihoe, i.e. in the three largest Korean new religions. The three religions, however, interpreted *yeomwon* differently, and discussed whether the principle derived from divine revelation or simply from the human organizational skills of their founders. Daesoon Jinrihoe reformulated *yeomwon*, while keeping its basic features, as *yeomwun*, creating a unique system of personal relationship that may well be the main cause of its phenomenal success and growth.

**KEYWORDS:** Daesoon Jinrihoe, *Yeomwon*, *Yeomwun*, Donghak, Cheondoism, Won Buddhism, Korean New Religions.

### *Introduction*

Religious studies have mostly developed by researching major religions, and have assumed that the doctrinal aspects have a greater value than others in the study of religion. Ninian Smart (1927–2001) noted that most research on religions is based on the idea that doctrines are their most important feature (Smart 1998, 17–26). Academic studies of Korean new religions, such as Cheondoism, Daesoon Jinrihoe, and Won Buddhism, which emerged at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and became phenomenally successful, also prioritized their doctrinal aspects.

From the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Korea, encountering the Western

powers, was colonized by Japan and went into powerful culture shocks. The three main Korean new religions emerged consecutively, and developed during a period of sixty years. They caused rapid social changes through their revolutionary doctrines, and influenced the birth of other religious movements. It is no wonder that studies of these movements have considered doctrines a priority.

However, these three religious traditions also exhibited unique organizational features. They utilized the organizational principle focusing on personal lineage that had come from the cultivation methods of Daoism, which was integrated with folk religions and functioned as a basic religion in Korea. However, this has not attracted enough attention until now. In addition, it is also neglected that the three religions transformed their organizational principle of personal lineage during their historical development, and successfully established unique organizational systems (Park 2008, 161). This study aims to support the idea that the organizational principle based on personal lineage played a crucial role in the nestling-down of new religions in Korea through their establishment and development. In particular, the principle greatly contributed to the phenomenal success of Daesoon Jinrihoe.

The life of Daesoon Jinrihoe devotees is mostly centered at a local branch called *bangmyeon* (方面). These local branches are different from the central organization, and one must go through a local branch to join Daesoon Jinrihoe. Without exception, every devotee has an affiliation to a certain local branch. For almost all devotees, most cultivation and education activities are carried out in a local branch. Therefore, a local branch is characterized as a basic structure that provides the foundation for the movement's religious activities (Park 2013a, 134–35).

All the local branches are named after a geographical place that existed either in the past or at present. However, the name of a local branch and the region in which its activities take place are not actually interrelated. This non-conformity between the local branch name and the actual place where the activities take place can create a somewhat puzzling feeling when somebody first experiences Daesoon Jinrihoe. A local branch is not organized in a district related to its name, which is different from the parish-based system prevailing in other religions (Park 2013b, 256).

The geographic criterion, on which the parish system is based, does not apply

to the model of the local branch as a basic unit in Daesoon Jinrihoe. The reason is that the religious tradition of Daesoon Jinrihoe is closely related to cultivation-oriented religious practices. A devotee joins Daesoon Jinrihoe through a ceremony which is called “Dao-entering ritual (入道式),” and officially becomes a “Dao-practitioner (修道人).” This shows that the religion defines its identity as Dao. Even though the terminology and concept of “religion” has been introduced to Korean society more than one century ago, the fact that Daesoon Jinrihoe’s identity is perceived as “Dao” more than as “religion” emphasizes that cultivation has a more crucial status than belief in this movement (Park 2013a, 134).

In belief-oriented religions what is central is to identify an authority controlling the doctrine of faith and the rituals. The organizational structure is built on the basis of clergy and holy sites. In a religion that emphasizes cultivation, the structure is based on the master-disciple relationship. In other words, religions that define their aims as worship and submission to God focus on the relationships between God and the devotees (Lee 1991, 69). A many-for-one system is built on the location of holy sites, in which the clergy connects God and humans. This naturally leads to the establishment of a parish-based systems. Yet, cultivation-oriented Korean new religions are mainly based on a one-for-one relationship, of master-disciple, or mentor-mentee. The religions’ human network is built through the expansion and repetition of this one-for-one relationship.

This is also true for Daesoon Jinrihoe’s human network, which is organized through the expansion and repetition of the one-for-one relationship called *yeonwun* (緣運, destined relationship), which is similar to the master-disciple, or mentor-mentee relationship. When the scale reaches 1,000 people, a local branch called *bangmyeon* is created (Goh 2007, 214–17).

Daesoon Jinrihoe represents the strongest personal lineage organization among the Jeungsan religions. Daesoon Jinrihoe began in 1969, but it was rooted in Mugeukdo, which was founded in 1925. It was disbanded by the Japanese colonial government in 1941, resumed its religious activities in 1948, and changed its name to Taegeukdo in 1950. Although during this historical transition, there were changes in detail, these successive religious orders find their continuity in the organizational principle of which *yeonwun* is in the center. Looking at the starting point of the concept *yeonwun* and its development process, one can easily understand the organizational principle based on personal

lineage and local branches in Daesoon Jinrihoe. However, to have a better understanding on the structure of Daesoon Jinrihoe, it is necessary to look first into the concept of *yeonwon* (淵源, the fountainhead), which commonly appears in Korean new religions such as Cheondoism, Won Buddhism, as well as in Daesoon Jinrihoe itself (Park 2013a, 136).

### *The Yeonwon System in Donghak*

*Yeonwon* has been widely used in the traditions of Korean Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Korean neo-Confucianism focuses on the tradition (or succession) of Dao (*li*). Korean Zen Buddhism emphasizes the dharma lineage transmitted from master to disciple in an unbroken line. Korean Daoism values the lineage of Dao. In these traditions, the concept of Dao or dharma lineage was always crucial (Lee 1991, 69). *Yeonwon* refers to the origin (*won*) in which the dharma (Dao or law) gushes out like a spring (*yeon*), and its meaning is akin to the notions of Dao and dharma lineage themselves.

Since Choe Suwon (Choe Je-u, 1824–1864) founded Donghak (Eastern Learning) and spread its ideas, a revolutionary change emerged in the concept of *yeonwon*. Choe expanded the concept, which had been nurtured by the cultivation-oriented traditions of Korean Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism, to the propagation of Donghak. Jeop (接) was a cross-regional unit organized by Donghak in the early years, according to human networks of “predecessors” and “successors.” The names of places where many *Jeopwon* (members of Jeop) and *Jeopju* (leader of Jeop) lived were used to designate the units known as Jeop and Po (布), forming a well-organized network. This principle of *yeonwon* was transmitted to Cheondoism, the Korean new religion that developed from Donghak (Pyo 1995, 364).

The concept had an ancient lineage as the Daoist organizational principle of the master-disciple relationship, in which secret talismans, sutras, incantations, and rituals were passed down, but it was expanded to the propagation as a way of following a tradition within the framework of a specific religious faction. Choe’s disciples called a person who transmitted his teaching *yeonwon* and a person who received the teaching *yeonbi*. The *yeonbi* received incantations and sutras from the *yeonwon* and achieved a mystic religious state by participating in rituals. This

was consecrated as the tradition (or succession) of Dao from a devotee who conveys the teaching to one who receives it, or as a mentor-mentee and *yeonwon-yeonbi* system as a way of propagating the faith.

Again, Choe's was not a system where, based on a territorial principle, devotees were managed by the clergy of a local branch. Instead, a religious order focusing on the powerful human networks-oriented principle was established, where every devotee was both a master and a disciple. Governed by the personal principle devised by Choe, the religious community organized along the *yeonwon* system enabled most devotees to regard themselves as "clergy" without in fact being led by a professional clergy. Donghak devotees had become a community united by a spiritual blood-lineage and connected to a shared tradition of Dao. This model had a strong impact on different organizations throughout Korean society, via the Donghak Revolution of 1894 and the subsequent spread of Cheondoism (Park 2008, 162).

#### *The Yeonwon System in the Main Korean New Religions*

At the end of 19<sup>th</sup> and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Donghak and Cheondoism had great effects on Korean society, it was not surprising that Kang Jeungsan (Kang Il-Sun, 1871–1909), beginning his religious activity, accepted the *yeonwon* system developed by Choe and transformed it. In fact, Kang Jeungsan claimed to be Sangje (the Supreme God of Heaven), and to have given himself a revelation to Choe before descending to the Earth and incarnating as a human. It was Sangje who had taught Choe the essence of Donghak, but there were steps only Sangje himself, by incarnating as Kang Jeungsan, could take (Park 2008, 162). The *yeonwon* system adopted by Choe and his successors was the esoteric law of Sangje Kang Jeungsan.

The *yeonwon* system and its concepts used in Donghak were completely reformulated by Kang Jeungsan. After his death, most of his disciples, who had been directly or indirectly involved in Donghak, utilized the same system as a matter of course when they established their religious orders.

In 1917, when he returned to Korea after his exile in Manchuria, Jo Jeungsan (1895–1958), who claimed that he had succeeded to the authority of religious orthodoxy through Kang Jeungsan's revelation, started its activities, and founded

the forerunner of Daesoon Jinrihoe. He also promoted the *yeonwon* system, into which the *yeonwon* system was changed and developed. Since then, the forerunner of Daesoon Jinrihoe grew spectacularly, by using its *yeonwon* system-organization. Because Kang Jeung-san did not designate his successor, his disciples were split up in a myriad of different groups, which was also due to the *yeonwon* system. The tradition that developed through Mugeukdo, Taegeukdo and Daesoon Jinrihoe, based on the personal lineage developed by Jo Jeung-san after Kang's death, experienced only minor divisions and produced the largest Korean new religion.

In the mid-1910s, the founder of Won Buddhism, Sotaesan (Park Jung-Bin, 1891–1943), observed the activities of the main Jeung-san groups, mostly active in the North Jeolla Province after Kang's death, and started his own religious order. Sotaesan too could not avoid the influence of the *yeonwon* system, which had been passed down from Donghak to the religious orders in the Jeung-san lineage. Scholars who have studied Sotaesan's early years believe that, by substantially accommodating and modifying the doctrines and the organizational principle of the Jeung-san religious groups, he was able to establish Won Buddhism and develop it. This is not surprising, because most of the early followers of Sotaesan had previously followed the religious lineage of Kang Jeung-san (Park 2008, 163).

In short, the *yeonwon* system, rooted in the idea of sequential teaching coming from the cultivation-oriented religious tradition in Korea, was changed and expanded into an organizational principle by Donghak, settled down uniquely in Korean religious culture, and was re-interpreted and re-created by Kang Jeung-san. Daesoon Jinrihoe developed the model into the *yeonwon* system, whereas Won Buddhism adopted its own *yeonwon* system. The most successful new religious organizations in Korea all originated from one root.

As of the late 19th century, Korea was an ethical, rational Confucian country dominated by the Confucian literati class. Its contradictory social system had sparked a strong opposition from the subjugated classes, including farmers, for over 500 years. Criticizing the ideology of the ruling class, they quickly and massively responded to new religions that secretly spread esoteric knowledge and rituals to replace the dominant ideology, established family-like communities, and suggested the attainment of Dao enlightenment through mystic cultivation and the advent of an earthly paradise. The three main new religions—Donghak,

Won Buddhism, and what later became Daesoon Jinrihoe—tried to replace conventional religions, while at the same time emotionally and ideologically satisfying the religious desires of the people. In the end, they were successful and overwhelmed the established religions. Their revolutionary thought and explosive growth were also able to develop successfully notwithstanding the political oppression and the Korean modernization. This success was due to their human networking system, which in times of oppression allowed them to operate secretly.

### *The Evolution and Crisis of the Yeonwon System in Cheondoism*

The three largest new religious movements followed a different course. Donghak and early Cheondoism restructured *yeonwon* based on geographical constraints or circumstances. In the 1920s, Cheondoism weakened the *yeonwon* system and in some instances even abolished it. This clearly shows that Donghak, particularly in its late incarnation as Cheondoism, had a skeptical view on the theory that the *yeonwon* system was a divine organizational principle. To this very day, followers of Cheondoism continue to discuss two different theories, that the *yeonwon* human network system was implemented by Choe because of divine revelation, or that it was a simple human creation. Pyo Young-sam (1925–2008), a leading “Proclaimer of the Way” (宣道師, Seondosa) in Cheondoism and respected theologian, insisted that the *yeonwon* system emerged naturally after Choe started to propagate Donghak in June 1861 (Pyo 1994, 150–52, Pyo 1999, 103; Pyo 2001, 55). On the other hand, a text by the Assembly of Cheondoism Yeonwon states,

The *yeonwon* ... [is] the Law of Mind in the lineage of the great founder (Choe Je-u) ... Our order in terms of the *yeonwon* system started from the *jeonju* system, which the great founder had implemented in his third year of propagation of virtue. Since then, the *yeonwon* has become a core feature of our history, playing a major role in the great Dao, up to today (The Assembly of Cheondoism Yeonwon 2005, 1).

The leader of Dongwon-Po, which is one of the largest factions in Cheondoism, insisted that,

The spirit of the *yeonwon* has its origin in faith, and the organization of the *yeonwon* is a precious pledge of faith. If we try to pursue faith without the spirit of *yeonwon*, we would end up with a bunch of meaningless exercises. If we believe there is something false in the system

of *yeonwon*, perhaps we should abandon the pursuit of Dao altogether... The *yeonwon* system is distinct from other religions, and is the only way to transmit Dao as well as propagate virtue (Ha 1997, 180).

Because of these discussions, elements of the parish system were adopted by Cheondoism. In other words, the *yeonwon* system and the parish system were managed in compromise. This reveals that the *yeonwon* system of Donghak and Cheondoism was alternatively regarded as divine or secular, which influenced its development.

### *The Yeonwon System in Won Buddhism*

Since the early 1920s, Won Buddhism operated a *yeonwon* system different from the other two main Korean new religions and without a clear basis on divine revelation. The most important organization in Won Buddhism is the *Gyohwadan*. It was also the organization most clearly influenced by the *yeonwon* system. Every Won Buddhism devotee should join this basic organization. *Gyohwadan*, as the basic unit that every devotee still must belong to today, consists of ten people: a chair, a deputy chair, and eight members (Lee 1989, 423–28; Goh 2013, 188).

In this organizational structure, everybody except the chair may at the same time become the chairperson of a subordinate unit. But, since the main purpose of *Gyohwadan* was education and communication rather than propagation, the *yeonwon* system was only partially adopted. In fact, in Won Buddhism, the *yeonwon* system, which in other religions is considered of divine origin, was abolished by decree, and became irrelevant for religious authority or power. Won Buddhism tried to implement the centralized and territory-focused management of its organization, based on the clergy, by transforming the system it had originally adopted (Park 2008a, 164).

### *Daesoon Jinrihoe: From Yeonwon to Yeonwun*

Daesoon Jinrihoe has consistently recognized the *yeonwon* system as a law emanating from Kang Jeung-san, and has adopted it as an organizational principle from its early times to the present. Daesoon Jinrihoe and its predecessor



organizations have maintained a strong belief in the *yeonwon* system for over 100 years, as a constitutive element of their propagation-oriented identity. This was, in my opinion, the main reason for their rapid growth, once the organization reached a certain scale (Park 2013a, 179).

It is, however, necessary to pay attention to the scale and change of the *yeonwon* and *yeonwun* models in the religions in the lineage of Jo Jeongsan, since they corresponded to the change of Korean society in the 1920s. As we have seen, *yeonwun* is based on *yeonwon*, but includes peculiarities typical of the Jo Jeongsan lineage. Mugeukdo, which was founded in 1925, operated the *yeonwun* system on the basis of a single chain of command, and this helped it grow into a nationwide organization in a short time. Although it was weakened by the forced dissolution during the Japanese colonial government in 1941, after Korea gained independence Mugeukdo restored and expanded its influence through powerful internal cohesiveness and orientation towards propagation. It changed its name to Taegeukdo and was reorganized through the local branches called *bangmyeon*, to keep the *yeonwun* system running smoothly. Unlike the *yeonwun* system of Mugeukdo, the *bangmyeon*-based model in Taegeukdo had a dual line of command, one specializing in propagation and the other in edification.

The two-office system of the *Pojeongwon* (in charge of propagation) and the *Hojeongwon* (in charge of education) was restructured by Jo Jeongsan in 1956. It implied that the *yeonwun* system had evolved from a single track of command into a dual track. As the scale of the organization was larger and larger, this system derived from the need to manage it efficiently and to foster highly skilled religious manpower. Nevertheless, this may also be interpreted as an attempt to promote active propagation and edification in response to the radical socio-cultural change amid the modernization of Korea.

Local branches were once again developed into a three-department system at the end of the 1970s. Park Wudang (1917–1995 according to the lunar calendar used by Daesoon Jinrihoe, or 1918–1996 according to the solar calendar) inherited a model including one office that consisted of two departments, the Department of Education and the Department of Propagation. He implemented a system including two offices and three departments in 1978. The two offices were the *Pojeongwon* and the *Jeongwon* and the three departments supervised Education, Propagation, and Proper Guidance. Park's change was to create a new

Department of Proper Guidance of the *Jeongwon*. It was a significant change.

As reflected in its name, the Department of Proper Guidance of the *Jeongwon* was established to protect the solidity of the organization and secure internal cultivation discipline, as at the end of the 1970s, the propagation activities in the *Pojeongwon* were accelerated, and the scale of the organization was rapidly increasing. In addition, the change may also be read as an attempt to solve some problems of the previous system and prevent the concentration of religious power, a goal that the *yeonwon* organization achieved through separation of powers.

Although this is just an analogy, the Departments of Propagation and of Education of the *Pojeongwon* may be compared to the executive and legislative branches of a secular government, and the Department of Proper Guidance of the *Jeongwon* to the judicial branch. The *Jeongwon* was established to overcome an exclusively growth-oriented paradigm and the problems of authoritarianism it caused, and to secure the sustainability and capability to grow in a proper way, by separating the different centers of religious power (Park 2013a, 165–68).

As mentioned earlier, the master-disciple relationship was important in cultivation-oriented religions, and made the *yeonwon* system emerge. Furthermore, Daesoon Jinrihoe has embraced a Daoist worldview, a mystical theological system, and unique cultivation methods that could be hard to accept in the cultural climate created by modernization. In this context, the tradition that masters passed down to disciples was even more important. But the master's role was very difficult to play, the skillful manpower was insufficient, and the socio-cultural environment of the times was very inadequate to train it properly (Park 2013a, 159).

The *yeonwon* system answered the problem. Since many devotees naturally played the role of masters through propagation, they had a kind of experience similar to the clergy's in other religions. Thus, the *yeonwon* system identified cultivators with the right potential to improve, and efficiently nurtured them into religious professional manpower. Such people in the *yeonwon* organization worked for the edification of the first-time members who were part of the same *yeonwon*. This system offered multiple masters to each disciple, and proved remarkably effective.

## *Conclusion*

This study has compared the development process of the three main Korean new religions, Cheondoism, Daesoon Jinrihoe, and Won Buddhism. Cheondoism alternatively located the roots of the *yeonwon* system in sacred or secular processes. Daesoon Jinrihoe perceived it as sacred, and Won Buddhism only absorbed its systemic features as an organizational principle. To understand the success of these religions, looking at their organizational principles is crucial, and may be a new angle in the study of Korean new religions. Among the three largest new religions in Korea, Daesoon Jinrihoe has the strongest *yeonwon* system, followed by Cheondoism and Won Buddhism in this order (Park 2013a, 181).

The sect-denomination continuum, the degree of factionalism, exclusiveness, and the missionary orientation of each religious order can be tentatively arranged according to how they interpret and apply the concept of *yeonwon* (Park 2008, 165). Follow-up research is recommended on whether a functional relationship exists between these additional features of each new religion and its interpretation of *yeonwon*. I believe that at least some features are directly related with the interpretation of the *yeonwon* in each movement, and that this may be an important tool to understand Korean new religions. Japanese new religions, such as Tenrykyo and Soka Gakkai, also adopted the personal lineage system in the process of their modernization, and paying attention to their rapid expansion and system management during the same years would make for interesting comparative research. Additionally, distinguishing religious organizations according to their principles based alternatively on personal or territorial lineage systems may provide a new tool for the study of the world's religions.

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