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**Some Aspects of Park Chang No Kyo—A Korean  
Revitalization Movement**

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—A KOREAN REVITALIZATION MOVEMENT

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An attempt to analyze a localized, specific phenomenon often suffers from a lack of perspective. This malaise is not confined to present-day Korea where chronic economic instability is coupled to a high degree of social unrest. Some nations, especially those which had relatively advanced traditional social structures and value systems, find that cataclysmic changes have taken place in their societies in the wake of developments and independence after World War II. Nascent industrialism, urbanization, alteration in family patterns, in short, a to be expected re-formulation of ethos and worldview is in process throughout much of the world and especially in Asia. In such a situation, for example, the traditional values of the "old" Asian society are constantly, and often in seemingly contradictory ways, being modified by the "new" values coming primarily from the complex, industriously more advanced western societies. Until the newly introduced values do in fact become a functional part of the fabric—in this case Korean society—one may anticipate not only evidences of turbulence, friction, anomie, and socio-political disorders, but also an often surprising degree of cultural revitalization. This process may be well viewed as one in which hitherto untapped human resources unproductive in the face of drastic social change may be channeled into both productive and personally rewarding avenues of activity. In the descriptive paragraphs which follow, in which one of the most widespread socio-religious movements of post-1945 Korea will be discussed, despite what to the Western scholar may often seem to be unusual and even amusing manifestations, one should keep in mind that the overriding premise of this discussion is that such movements have shown a unique and significant capacity for arousing sincere public enthusiasm and consequent civil action in a period when both traditional values are discredited and new values have not yet been functionally assimilated.

While postwar Korea has not given rise to as variegated a spectrum of "New Religions" (*shinko shū kyō*) as postwar Japan,

nevertheless there is clear evidence of a parallel emergence in Korea of vital dynamic and popularly appealing religious movements.<sup>1</sup> These new religious cults in Korea have not only helped to fill the psychological vacuum resulting from the end of the Japanese occupation and subsequent liberation of Korea in 1945, but also have succeeded in providing a seemingly hopeful and more secure psycho-economic future to many hitherto economically depressed and hopeless individuals.

Achieving a satisfactory understanding of these movements is not an easy task. There still exists a definite lack of adequate field work-based source material. This is not only true in the sense that we lack data for a comprehensive study of Asian "New Religions" but also, and perhaps even more important, we lack data for any cross-cultural studies involving Korea. Certainly it could be said that among East Asian cultures Korea is and has been the stepchild of ethnologists interested in that particular area of the world.

The sometimes stormy movement of the "Olive Tree" as *Park Chang no kyō* is also at times referred to, has built a boom town ("Christian Town") for more than 20,000 of its followers, and has established a heavy industrial complex some ten miles from Seoul almost overnight. It is now in the process of constructing a city for some 100,000 of its believers featuring what it calls "the world's largest temple" seating some 50,000. On July 20, 1962 a second "Christian Town" was begun on a 900-acre territory adjacent to the first development by the Zion Foundation, a name which the movement adopted for its "external" relations. This foundation with its far reaching implications is organized as follows:

The Zion Educational Foundation is divided into the Departments of Education, Business, and Construction. Directly dependent on the Department of Education are the Zion Kindergarten, the Zion Elementary School, the Zion Junior-High and High School, and the Zion University which is not yet fully operational. Also managed by the Department of Education are the Evan-

<sup>1</sup> On January 15, 1964 the Korean Ministry of Education assailed *Sōka Gakkai*, one of the most powerful and widespread Japanese "New Religions" as illegal under South Korea's Domestic laws.

*Sōka Gakkai* advanced to Korea in 1963, and had by the end of the same year established at least eight branches in major cities throughout South Korea. In Taegu, South Korea's third largest city, *Sōka Gakkai* claimed a membership of some 10,000.

gelical Association, the International Christian News Division, an Office of Industry, a Village (Ri) Office, and a Post Office. The Department of Business is divided into a Property Control Section, a General Affairs Section, an Accounting Section, a Business Section, and a Treasury Section. The Business Section is further divided into a Sales Section and an Industrial Section. Also managed by the General Affairs Section are a Broadcasting Station, a Telephone Exchange, a Transportation Section, and an Electricity Section. The "Altar" (Temple) has its own organizational divisions of Propagation, Doctrine, and Chorus.

This foundation and its organizational network is the core of the movement begun by Park Tae Sun, which amid great controversy as to whether it is a heretical religious or political movement now claims an estimated membership of over 1,800,000 throughout the Republic of Korea.

Without foreign aid or government subsidy, a practice not usual to present-day Korea, the movement was able to build the first town in some eight months beginning in November 1957 when the first housing project comprising some seventy units was completed.

Government reaction under former President Rhee was swift and severe almost from the beginning of the movement. Park was jailed repeatedly on diverse charges from "murder" to "communism." The Second Republic under Chang Myun also looked with great disfavor on any expansion of the movement because of the increased power of National Assemblymen associated with it. Park Chung Hee, leader of the May 1961 military revolution and the current Third Republic President, has however given the movement a rather free rein in the development of "Olive Treeism."<sup>2</sup>

"Christian Town I" in Pumbak-ni was built soon after the local Presbyterian authorities had expelled Park Tae Sun as a heretic. It was at that time that Presbyterian Park became Elder Park around whom devout followers started gathering from all parts of South Korea.

By 1962, the "Olive Tree" was blossoming in "Christian Town I" to the extent of some fifty large, by Korean standards, factories, six modern apartment house complexes, schools ranging from

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<sup>2</sup> For example the military government approved on May 24, 1962 an additional housing project on some 311 acres acquired by the movement for this purpose.

Kindergarten to High School, and over 2000 modern housing units. The movement also provided its believers with a post office, a police station, a motor pool and a fire station, all manned by government personnel who were at the same time members of the "Olive Tree." Each of the six apartment buildings houses 120 families who rent space on a money deposit basis (key money).

The factories managed by the Zion Foundation produced by 1962 some fifty items ranging from a special brand of "Christian" caramels and cake to pianos and engines. Other products include florescent lamps, artificial flowers, underwear, toys, soya sauce, cosmetics and soap, all marketed under the brand name "Zion" and sold by over 500 saleswomen who live in the town. In 1962 daily output amounted to some 500,000 won worth of underwear and 700,000 won worth of confectionery goods. (\$1=W 130) It is interesting to note that a considerable amount of underwear and soya sauce required by the Korean Armed Forces is supplied by "Zion" factories. "Zion" brand underwear has long since made its debut in Southeast Asia, and the artificial flowers manufactured by the believers are now reaching the United States in increasing quantities. The economic future for the movement looks even brighter. Industry is becoming more diversified and large scale developments are nearing completion in the new industrial complex which the Foundation is constructing on the bank of the Han river some fifteen miles east of Seoul. While light industrial plants have become operational there, the Foundation continues to build factories for the production of cement, glass and steel. An eighty-five-foot steel boat was completed at one of the plants to facilitate "Zion" sponsored transportation of passengers and cargo between the industrial complex and the mother town. A railway siding is also now becoming operational. This particular thirty-acre site was chosen by Elder Park personally while he was flying over the area on his way to Pusan on a missionary trip.

Unskilled workers at the "Zion" plants are paid 1,200 won a month for a twelve-hour day six days a week, and, though skilled labor is paid somewhat more, these figures are far less than standard wages on the Korean labor market. The believer-workers explain that the extra four hours, above the standard eight-hour day, represent purely voluntary service. A woman

worker remarked: "We built this town, and thus we are employees and employers at the same time. We are happy to work overtime for ourselves."

Apparently such devotion stems from an unquestioning faith in the foresight and leadership of Elder Park. His followers claim that he has worked more miracles than all the saints of Christendom together.

Park Tae Sun who is 47 was born in Yup nam ri, Duk Chon, Pyun An Buk Province, North Korea. Not much is known about his early life except what he himself tells in an Horatio Alger-like autobiographical sketch: "My home life was anything but blessed from the very beginning of my life. From the time of my birth my father did not return home except when he needed money. My mother died when I was nine, and I had no one left. I then decided to turn to the Presbyterian church, and I started to attend the Duk Chon Sunday School. I graduated from Elementary School. However, due to the lack of money I had to wait to attend High School. I thereupon made up my mind to go to Tokyo and to continue my studies in Japan. While in Japan, I worked as a milkman and newsboy, was treated very badly but did manage to graduate from Technical High School after attending it at night. I was often hungry and repeatedly contemplated suicide. However, adversity made me wise, helped my future, and was most profitable for me. After graduation I was even able to operate a small precision tool company at Kurata." It is perhaps interesting to note some of his more personal anti-Japanese sentiments which are quite obviously very much in tune with the post-1945 emotional nationalism of his Korean compatriots. He says, for example: "I never committed adultery, even in that obscene city of Tokyo, though I was single and all alone. Japanese women are generally ladies of easy virtue,<sup>3</sup> and furthermore in the year of Showa 19 (1944) there were abundant young ladies in Tokyo since most of the young men had been drafted. Once when I was taking a bath by myself at a hot spring, a young Japanese girl joined me. Being very afraid of her and shocked by her boldness, I ran away. It was easy to commit sin in Japan but I never did." The shock of this experience

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<sup>3</sup> This stereotype of the easy virtued Japanese female in contrast to the high-moraled and well-disciplined Korean woman is still quite widely accepted by Koreans today.

apparently remained with him for some time as witness his own account of the overabundance of modesty with which he faced his bride-to-be for the first time: "My character was such that I could not talk with women. When I had an interview with a prospective bride (who is now my wife), I was too shy to speak to her at all."

Park Tae Sun returned to Korea in 1944, became a regular attendant of the Namdae Mun Presbyterian Church, and started the "Korea Precision Machine Company" at Su Saek (Seoul), employing at one time some 340 workers, which apparently prepared him more than adequately for his later managerial responsibilities in the "Olive Tree" movement. In 1954, Park became an elder in the Chang-Dong Presbyterian Church in Seoul, about the same time he began to be seen frequently in the retinue of a Korean woman evangelist in her fifties who was known for her faith healing of the insane, blind, and mute. Apparently pressed by these more important activities he transferred title to his company to his elder brother. He states of this period: "After having been a faithful churchgoer for over twenty years I began to feel that the sermons which I was hearing were not fit to God's will. I asked many questions but none of the ministers could give me a satisfactory answer. I thus became to believe that I should receive God's power from him directly."

In April 1955, a big revival meeting was held for ten days at Namsan Park in Seoul under the auspices of the Korean Revival Association, Park being one of the main speakers. It was an eventful meeting attended by some 20,000. During this meeting, Park claims he received a vision of what he terms the "holy fire" and the "fresh water" both coming directly from heaven. One individual who attended, Yim Young Shin, a former Minister of Commerce and Industry and President of Central University, is cited in an article by Kim Kyung Rai<sup>4</sup> to have actually smelled a strange "sin-burning odor" during one of Park's revival sermons. Kim Kyung Rai describes one of the meetings as follows: "The meeting began at 4 a.m., the crowds having come from far and near spent the whole night sitting on the ground waiting. After Park's arrival, the crowd sang hymns for an hour while clapping their hands violently. When Park descended from the platform

<sup>4</sup> "The Drama and Uproar of Elder Park's Healing" *Ya Dam & Shil Wha*, September 1958, pp. 53-55.

wearing only a shirt, the multitudes bowed and pressed forward to greet him. 'Now, get up. Stand in the name of Jesus Christ' shouted Park while at the same time massaging a man's head whom Park's helpers had singled out for him as a cripple. One moment later, the same helpers shouted 'Here stands a cripple who has not stood for thirty years,' hundreds of people hearing this began to applaud. Park continued to walk among the crowd massaging heads and limbs, when the sun rose he returned to the platform and one of his helpers announced 'One thousand were healed this morning by Elder Park,' and again the crowd applauded."

Park's own particular methods of faith healing and accompanying prayer which he developed during this period are referred to as "An-Chal" (touch of peace). They involve a vigorous message by Park by which he is said to transmit his divine power to the afflicted individual. Water with which Park washed his feet came to be a cure-all which would lead whoever drank it to "eternal life." It was during this initial period of the movement that Park's followers started to call him "Olive Tree," "Spiritual Mother," and the "Righteous Man of the East." He himself declared in some of his sermons that he is the "one from the East" of whom already Isaiah had spoken.<sup>5</sup> Park himself interprets this to mean that the "East" is Korea and the "coast lands"<sup>6</sup> of the same bible passage refer to Japan. He explains that the "two Olive Trees" and the "two lampstands"<sup>7</sup> refer to himself. As a result of the hymn "Joy to the world! the Lord is come!" was changed by his followers to "the Olive is come!"

The complete verse<sup>8</sup> "Listen to me in silence, O coast lands; let the peoples renew their strength; let them approach, then let them speak; let us together draw near for judgment. Who stirred up one from the east whom victory meets at every step? He gives up nations before him, so that he tramples kings under foot; he makes them like dust with his sword, . . ." in Park's interpretation does not only mean that he is the "one from the East" but also implies that since Japan was defeated in World War II it is now "in silence." He argues that "after all, a righteous one must

<sup>5</sup> "Who stirred up one from the East whom victory meets at every step." *Isaiah 41:2*.

<sup>6</sup> "Listen to me in silence, O coast lands . . ." *Isaiah 41:1*.

<sup>7</sup> Rev. 11:4.

<sup>8</sup> *Isaiah 41:1, 2*.

appear in Korea," a pronouncement well in concert with the latent nationalism in the movement coupled to Park's previously referred to anti-Japanese feelings.

The verse<sup>9</sup> "These are the two Olive trees and the two lampstands which stand before the Lord of the earth. And if any one would harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes; . . ." in Park's interpretation further assumes added implications by inferring from the commonly accepted interpretation of this passage in which one of the two olive trees refers to Moses—representing the Law—and the other representing Elijah—the representative of the prophets—that he, Park, is not only representing the "true" law but that he is at the same time the one and only prophet and interpreter of this law.

In 1956, while Park's following grew in direct proportion to his ability to hold revival services, the Presbyterian church (Konggi Province Assembly) formally expelled him as a heretic. Since then the movement professes a supradenominational Christianity, and Park himself maintains that he is in fact a truer Christian "than the Christians who denounce me." Park has since lived in the center of controversy. He has been accused of being a charlatan, a heretic, a swindler, and a murderer. In 1959, Park was sentenced to two and a half years in prison for "injuring" sick followers in the process of "*An-Chal*," in addition to defrauding them of "offerings."<sup>10</sup> However, perhaps due to his increasing political power, Syngman Rhee's Liberal regime pardoned him shortly before the later proven rigged elections of 1960 which led to the downfall of Syngman Rhee and his regime. Park's difficulties were not over. He was jailed by Chang Myun's government which followed Syngman Rhee's a few months later on a charge of inducing his followers to vote for Liberal (followers of deposed President Rhee) candidates. Convicted, he served six months in prison on that charge. During one of the "Elder's" trials, the National Police revealed that followers of the movement were organizing a special group to "rescue" their leader either by force or money, and to retaliate against officials who dared to prosecute "the Righteous Man of the East."

The charges brought against Park during his fourth trial

<sup>9</sup> Rev. 11:4.

<sup>10</sup> According to the Jookan-Hyimang (Weekly Hope) of April 2, 1956 Park had collected, to the end of March 1956, some 70,000,000 whan (\$140,000). Jookan-Hyimang, April 2, 1956 p. 7.

(January 1958), for example, give an indication of his alleged activities. The government charged Park at the time with:

1. Evading taxes
2. Excess profit making on "Zion" produced merchandise
3. Obtaining "offerings" by fraudulent means
4. Secretly burying deceased believers
5. Promiscuity with female believers
6. Causing death and injury with "An-Chal"
7. Violation of the Education Laws
8. Fostering evasion of Military Service
9. Fostering domestic troubles and destruction of family relations
10. Building churches without building permits

Open violence in the end did follow. In December 1960, some 2000 believers, mostly female, stormed the daily Dong-A newspaper offices in down-town Seoul after the newspaper had carried an article calling the photographs of Park's "holy fires" which show streaks of fire descending on the assembled believers fakes. Overwhelming a 400-man police detachment the raiders ransacked the building. At the time, leaders of the movement stated that they had asked *Life Magazine* to authenticate the pictures in question and that they had received from *Life* an answer stating: "These are some things that cannot be forged by human skill."

This newspaper-sacking incident soon became a full-blown political issue. The House of Councilors created a special seven man committee to investigate the incident. The Republic's Ministry of Education also, at the same time, proceeded with an investigation of the movement charging a panel of scholars, religious leaders and government officials with the task. After months of bickering both investigations proved fruitless.

Against charges of heresy and criminal prosecution, leaders of the movement consistently maintain that theirs is the sole way to "eternal life," pointing out that after all Protestantism had been branded, at one time, as heretical by "corrupt" Roman Catholic officials. Korea's Roman Catholic Church is somewhat less harsh, stating that whether the movement is heretical or not,

“cannot be determined without a thorough study of its doctrine and practices.”

Heretical or not, the movement by 1963 had from 800,000 to 2,000,000 followers in some 303 congregations (*Chundo Kwan*), compared to some 97,306 Presbyterians after more than a half a century of intense missionary efforts. This perhaps suggests that Park Tae Sun himself is in his own way a more reliable interpreter in Korea of the “Protestant ethic” than the Western Presbyterian missionaries have been. Not only do the statistics cited here support this contention but further evidence is provided by Park’s zealous aversion to sin on the one hand and his highly successful economic ventures on the other hand.

Followers of Park range from illiterates to college graduates, the majority of “Christian Town I” residents having completed at least primary school,<sup>11</sup> from peasants to retired generals, from simple artisans to college professors and practicing M.D.’s. It even boasts the perennial American “snuggler” who lives in “Christian Town” with his Korean wife, participating in the management of the movement after having left the Presbyterian Church himself. Women followers were observed to be especially eager to offer whatever possessions they had—rings, watches, clothing; some ardent believers were even seen shedding their skirts during revival services since they had nothing else to give. Housewives left their families forever, husbands deserted their wives and children—donating in the process all their worldly possessions to gain “eternal life from sin.” To this, a movement leader remarked: “Of course there is no extortion involved, we just accept what they offer voluntarily.”

The movement’s services are conducted in form much like Presbyterian ones. However, they are characterized by rapid hymn-chanting accompanied by frenzied hand-clapping that continues for hours. One observer described it as follows: “They used drums, and even beat them at midnight. The neighbors were disturbed in their sleep. They clapped their hands whenever they sang hymns; the sounds could be heard from miles away.” Like some other Korean Protestant groups, the movement

<sup>11</sup> The educational background of “Christian Town I” residents in 1959 was as follows: College or University graduate—209; Attended University or College but not graduated—71; High School graduate—408; Attended but not graduated—85; Junior High School graduate—800; Attended but not graduated—217; Primary School graduate—3,173.

bans tobacco and alcohol. It also prohibits the eating of pork and peaches "for the pig is an animal of greed and the peach is the fruit with which the serpent tempted Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden." (It could not have been the apple since that is a valuable cash crop for the movement.)

As to the future of the movement after the death of Park, the writer was informed: "The Olive Tree is immortal, the last day of the world will come within his lifetime." Park in his sermons is careful not to distinguish between mortality and immortality, except when he deals with "non-believers" who are "not worthy of immortality." In a sense, Park's followers cannot lose, since for them, unlike for most other Koreans, "the Elder" is creating a modernized, but still Korean paradise only some ten miles from Seoul.

As in Japan in such movements as *Sōka Gakkai*, the Korean long accustomed to communal patterns coupled to a tightly knit family system, finds in his increasing loneliness and misery hope in this "New Religion." The believer is provided with a faith to persevere, and what is most important, his new activist approach to religion means not only prized economic security but less time for morbid introspection. Movements in Korea such as "Olive Tree" or *Tong-II Kyō* may serve as deliberate, organized and conscious efforts to integrate traditional patterns with the plethora of outside influences unleashed by sudden socio-economic changes in a given situation of a given society. Such traumatic shifts may not only include war, revolution, liberation from colonialism, or occupation but also any enforced acculturation in general.

It is in this light that one must therefore examine these phenomena which may provide a most useful scholarly insight into the process of culture change especially in the vigorous activism and the remarkable totality of commitment which adherents of "Olive Tree," "Tong-II Kyō," and *Sōka Gakkai* exhibit.

From the standpoint of the anthropological observer, while these features which are readily characterized as "aberrant" seem often most attractive for description, what may be far more significant is the role of movements such as *Park Chang no kyō* in providing an indigenous source through which the multiple effects of the Western impact can be focused to the overall and necessarily desirable aim of cultural revitalization.